The Politics of Sectarian Insecurity:

Alawite ʻAsabiyya and the Rise and Decline of the Asad Dynasty of Syria

Leon T. Goldsmith

A thesis submitted to the University of Otago
in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Politics

University of Otago
2012

"There are some problems in Syria now because the people want to live."

نحن كلنا سوريون

For my dear friends in Syria

Abstract

For centuries the Alawites were one of the most downtrodden religious minorities of the Middle East, so when an Alawite named Hafiz al-Asad rose to become president of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1971, it seemed a remarkable achievement. The wider Syrian Alawite community provided the foundation for Hafiz al-Asad's rule, which his son Bashar inherited in June 2000. Because of this support, the Alawites have been described as the 'dominant' or 'ruling' minority in Syria. This characterisation does not, however, match the reality for most Syrian Alawites who remain socially and economically underdeveloped and, furthermore, have seen their religious identity suppressed during the period of Asad rule. So why do Alawites continue to support the Asad dynasty? Using a qualitative inductive methodology based on field work, interviews and analysis of primary and secondary sources, this research examines the development and nature of Alawite politics. Ibn Khaldun's concept of *'asabiyya* (group feeling) is used as a framework to search for the fundamental factors that explain Alawite support for the Asad regime. This study concludes that sectarian insecurity is the primary element of Alawite politics that maintains their support for the Asad dynasty. This was a factor that Ibn Khaldun did not consider in his theory for the rise and decline of dynasties. Ultimately, the case of the Syrian Alawites demonstrates the impact of fear and insecurity on sub-state group interactions, and how this 'politics of sectarian insecurity' obstructs the emergence of genuine political pluralism in the Middle East.

Acknowledgements

I started this study in August 2008 with the University of Otago Politics Department. For the next three years I strove to understand one of the world's most unknown communities and an equally opaque regime; this thesis is the end result. I hope it sheds some much needed light on the subject. It was a privilege to get to know something of the Syrian people, whom I admire greatly. Syrians are generally a gracious, hospitable and hard working people whose potential has long been caged by fear and insecurity. I extend my most heartfelt thanks to all those in Syria who assisted my research in some way but who, for now, must remain anonymous. Thanks are also due to Mehmet and Murat who facilitated my research among the Alawites of Turkey. I am totally indebted to my supervisor, Professor William Harris, for his wise mentoring, tireless efforts in securing funding, connecting me with valuable contacts here and abroad, and his infectious enthusiasm for Middle East studies. Many thanks must go to Jean-Luc Payan for giving up so much of his precious time time helping me with my Arabic language and also Dr. Chris Rudd for his invaluable help with theory, methodology and structure. Many people helped along the way but special thanks are due the following people without whom this work would not have been possible: Mr Ferdinand Payan for his extensive translations, Andrew Lonie for creating the maps, Margaret Goldsmith for proof reading the final draft, and Caroline and Dermot Byrne for their kind assistance. Financially, this research was made possible by a University of Otago Postgraduate scholarship with additional funding from NZVCC, NZPSAA, and the University of Otago Humanities Division and Politics Department. Last, but certainly not least, I must affectionately thank Sarah Byrne and Cian (*ibni*) for their patience, support and daily inspiration.

-- Dunedin, October 2011

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

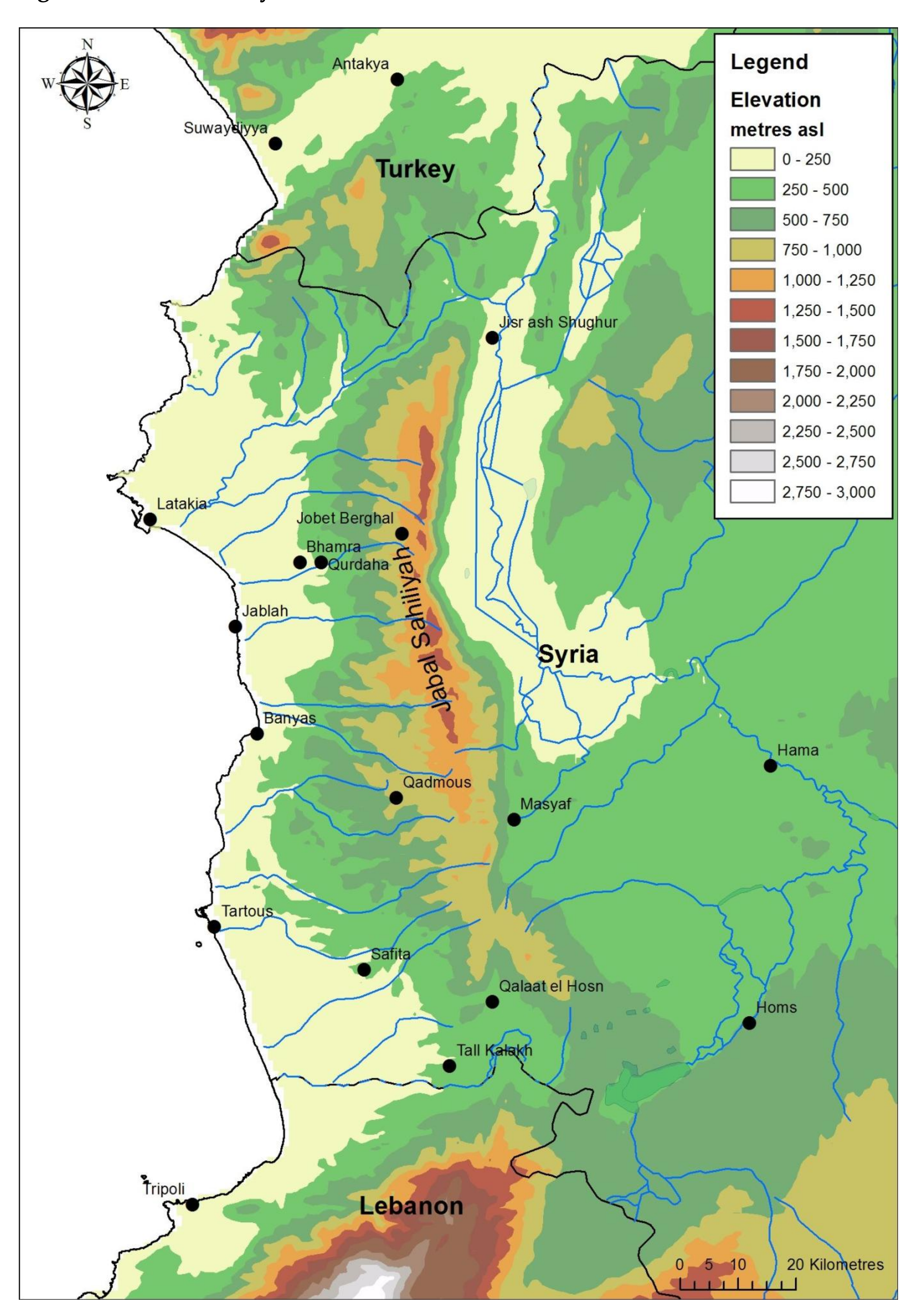
Figure 1. Syria (Northern Bilad al-Sham)

World Coastline courtesy of Peter Minton @ EVS-Islands

0 30 60 120 Kilometres

Source: Andrew Lonie, 2011

Figure 2. North West Syria

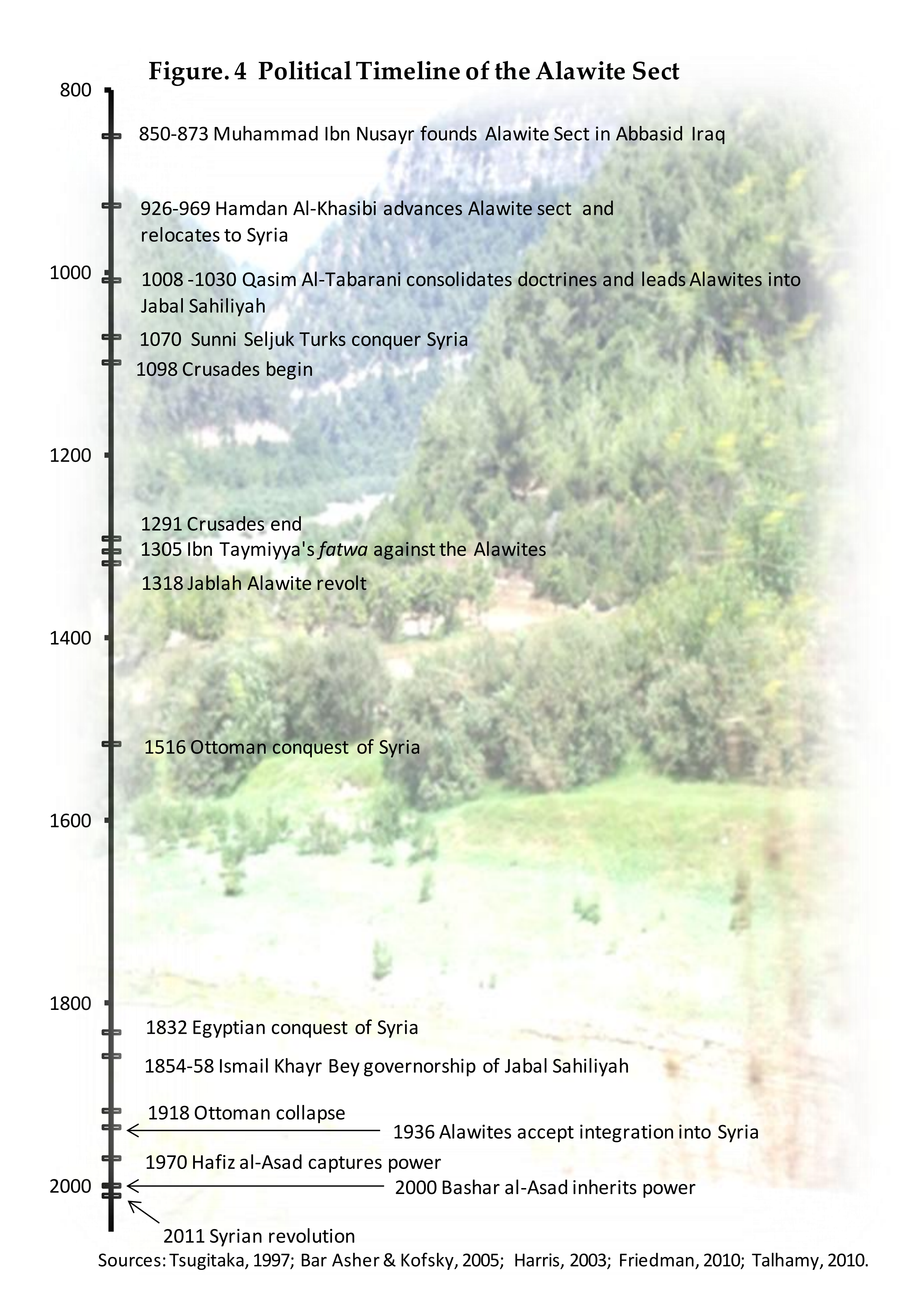


Source: Andrew Lonie, 2011

Figure 3. Distribution of Alawite Tribes

Sources: De Planhol, 1997, p.87; Weulersse, 1940, Andrew Lonie, 2011

Figure. 4 Political Timeline of the Alawite Sect



Sources: Tsugitaka, 1997; Bar Asher & Kofsky, 2005; Harris, 2003; Friedman, 2010; Talhamy, 2010.

Introduction

The inauguration of Hafiz al-Asad as Syrian President on February 22, 1971 marked an extraordinary rise for a member of one of the most disadvantaged minorities in the Middle East, the Alawites.[1] For the following forty-one years Syria was ruled by the Asad family dynasty, which Bashar al-Asad inherited in June 2000. The Alawite community formed the bedrock of Asad rule, yet despite a period of improvement under Hafiz al-Asad, ultimately, the Asad regime did not deliver significant advances in the social status or living standards of the great majority of Syrian Alawites. Furthermore, the Asad regime stripped Alawites of much of their unique religious identity, which they had preserved against the odds for centuries. Why then did the Alawites assist in the establishment and maintenance of the Asad dynasty? And why do they defend it so fiercely as the Syrian uprising, ever more tragically, continues into 2012?

[1] This community has been known by several names; however, I chose to use the term 'Alawite.' To avoid any confusion a short discussion of the various names attributed to the Alawites will be helpful. The original name of the Alawites has been given as 'al-Namiyriyya.' However, Yaron Friedman suggests that a more appropriate early name for the group is 'al-Numayriyya,' reflecting the eponym of the sect Ibn Nusayr's membership of the Banū Numayr tribe in ninth century Iraq. Ibn Nusayr's full name was Abū Shu'ayb Muhammad Ibn Nusayr al 'Abdī al-Bakrī al-Numayri, the early name of the sect therefore relates to him but also to his tribal affiliation, i.e. Ibn Nusayr *al-Numayri* (from the Numayr tribe). From the tenth century, the group became known as al-Nusayriyya. This name change reflected a shift away from a tribal identity to a sectarian identity focused on the person of Muhammad ibn Nusayr. In the nineteenth century European travellers and Missionaries used the term, 'Ansayrii,' which is likely a condensed form of al-Nusayriyya. The group retained this name in reference to themselves up until 1920 when they officially declared themselves as Alawites. This latest name change was an attempt to shift away from a heterodox religious identity towards a more orthodox association with Shi'a Islam. The name 'Alawite' refers generally to adherents of the fourth Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. Today the group prefers to be known as Alawites and assert that the name Nusayri is only used pejoratively by opponents who wish to discredit them. This point was made clear during three interviews by this author with Alawite Shaykhs in March 2011. Alawites hold 'Ali ibn Abi Talib as a central figure in their religion, thus it is logical for the group to be referred to as Alawites. In Arabic an Alawite is called an *'Alawi*, and the group would be *al-'Alawiyyun*, however as this research is composed in English, Alawite remains the appropriate name to use here. See, Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites, The Ghulat Sects* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988) p. 262; Yaron Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, (Brill, Netherlands, 2010) pp. 6-7; Xavier de Planhol, *Minorités En Islam, Géographie Politique et Sociale*, (Paris, Flammarion, 2007) p. 84.

In 2007, I wrote a dissertation on the political-geography of the Alawite minority in the Syrian Arab Republic.[2] In trying to assemble sources for that project I realized how seriously understudied the Alawites are. This seemed extraordinary considering their pivotal, though precarious, situation in modern Syria. My initial intention at the start of this doctoral study was to increase knowledge of the political situation of the Syrian Alawites. This in itself would constitute an important academic advance.

As I deepened and focused my research objectives, my primary concern turned to examining the basis and background of modern Alawite political proclivities, especially their relations with the Asad regime. A thorough exploration of the causes and nature of the Alawite-Asad political relationship carries great relevance to the overall topic of sectarian politics and the pervasiveness of authoritarianism in the Middle East. The case of the Syrian Alawites informs these problems by demonstrating the negative influence of fear and insecurity on sub-state group interactions, and how this 'politics of sectarian insecurity' obstructs the establishment of political pluralism in the Middle East.

Essentially, this study sought to understand what binds sub-state groups to authoritarian, dynastic regimes, how such political relationships might dissolve and why, in some cases, they do not. In terms of an applicable methodological and theoretical approach, these questions are most thoroughly addressed in *The Muqaddimah* (Introduction to History), written by the fourteenth-century Tunisian statesman-philosopher, Ibn Khaldun. In chapter three of *The Muqaddimah,* Ibn Khaldun advances a comprehensive theory about the factors that affect the maintenance of group loyalty and the implications for the rise and fall of dynasties.[3]

[2] Leon Goldsmith, 'Unearthing the Alawites: A Political Geography of the Alawite Community of Syria,' Honours Dissertation (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2007).

[3] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, An Introduction to History*, translated., Franz Rosenthal, abridged, N. J. Dawood (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 123-263.

Ibn Khaldun measured the political potential of, mainly tribal, sub-state groups in terms of their level of group feeling, group consciousness, or solidarity.[4] To Ibn Khaldun, only a group with high levels of 'group feeling' is capable of giving rise to a dynasty but then the 'group feeling' gradually declines and the dynasty becomes weak and vulnerable to groups with higher 'asabiyya.[5] Can this theory explain the rise of the Asad dynasty as well as predict its eventual demise? Or does sectarian insecurity, a factor overlooked by Ibn Khaldun, prevent any significant decline of Alawite support to the Asad dynasty?[6]

The merits of Ibn Khaldun's work as an explanation for modern political questions have been debated by Middle East scholars Ghassan Salame and William Harris. Salame argues that the subordination of "weak states" to traditional loyalties can be explained by Ibn Khaldun's ideas.[7] Harris has written that the workings of Ibn Khaldun's "tribal solidarity" are insufficient to explain the complex geopolitical dynamics of state formation both historically and in modern times.[8] A central proposition of this study is that by augmenting Ibn Khaldun's political theory to incorporate sectarian identity he can help explain the rise of the Asad dynasty from the high level of 'group feeling' within the Alawite community. But Ibn Khaldun cannot, however, entirely account for why Alawite support for the Asad dynasty remains so high. This shortfall in Ibn Khaldun's theoretical framework can be bridged by what this author terms, 'the politics of sectarian insecurity.' This concept embraces the political causes and effects of insecurity between religious communities. It provides an explanation for why a

---

[4] N.J. Dawood, 'Introduction,' in, Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. xi.

[5] Ibid. p. 123; Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun:The Birth of History and the Past of Third World* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 100.

[6] Fuad Khuri has noted and explained this gap in Ibn Khaldun's theories as due to his personal beliefs and historical context. Fuad Khuri, *Imams and Emirs, State, Religion and Sects in Islam*, (London: Saqi Books, 1990), pp. 54-55.

[7] Ghassan Salame, 'Strong' and 'Weak' States, a Qualified Return to the Muqaddimah, in G. Salame (ed.) *The Foundations of the Arab State*, Vol. 1, (New York: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 223

[8] Harris, William, *The Levant, A Fractured Mosaic*, (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2003). p. 58.

'group feeling' remains intact even when the all factors Ibn Khaldun listed for its likely decline have transpired.

Sectarian insecurity is often caused by collective memories of persecution, discrimination, and fears and prejudices due to lack of knowledge about the intentions and true character of other sects. A common effect of the politics of insecurity is that diverse states struggle to achieve genuine political pluralism, are prone to the consolidation of authoritarian rule and often descend into conflict. The political outlook of the Alawites was shaped, more than anything else, by a general deficit of security and periodic persecution at the hands of Sunni Muslim authorities over the course of their history. Insecurity has consequently been the defining feature of Alawite politics and was the main factor in the development of their 'group feeling.' It was this Alawite solidarity that made possible the establishment, consolidation and resilience of the Asad dynasty.

Syria scholar Volker Perthes has suggested that sectarian bonds are not enough to maintain group loyalties to regimes over the long term, which "necessarily involves selective distribution of privileges."[9] This study re-examines this idea and proposes that political support built on sectarian insecurity is more resilient than social-patronage support structures. As this study indicates, very few Alawites are disproportionately privileged in Syria today, yet their loyalty to the Asad regime remains largely intact. The continuation of broad Alawite support to Syrian president, Bashar al-Asad, over twelve months into a persistent uprising in 2011/2012, is testament to this.

Overall, the approach applied in this study will help explain the political relationship between the Alawites and the Asad dynasty, to provide a new perspective on authoritarianism, sectarianism and the role of minorities in Middle East politics. From a practical perspective there is an urgent need for research on Syria's Alawites. Syria is a central component of the Middle East both

---

[9] Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1995), p. 185.

geographically and politically; what occurs in Syria has far reaching consequences for the region. It is vital to increase understanding of Syrian internal dynamics involving the Alawites.

Ibn Khaldun never came into contact with the Alawite community and probably did not even know of their existence, yet on January 10, 1401, he stood with the great Mongol conqueror, Timurlane, before the gates of Damascus, the city that would become the seat of the Asad dynasty.[10] The meeting was a defining moment for Ibn Khaldun, who saw in Timurlane and his warriors, the embodiment of his theory for the rise and fall of dynasties based on their level of tribal 'group feeling.' [11] The Arabic term Ibn Khaldun used for this type of solidarity was *'asabiyya*, which was the key element in his theory that only rural/nomadic tribes with high levels of 'asabiyya have the potential to capture, or create, states or dynasties. According to Khaldun, once a dynasty is established the supporting group's 'asabiyya erodes through urbanisation, luxury and corruption, a process that accelerates as the dynasty moves into subsequent generations.

At the time of Ibn Khaldun's Damascus meeting, a dynasty had not emerged from geographic Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) since the Mirdasids of Aleppo in the eleventh century. Moreover, Ibn Khaldun's experience of Syria was mainly restricted to the long settled urban centres of Jerusalem, Damascus and Aleppo. It is understandable therefore, why he wrote that tribes capable of strong 'asabiyya, no longer existed in Syria.[12] Fewer than two hundred kilometres to the north of where Khaldun and Timurlane were meeting, however, in the coastal mountains of north-western Syria, resided the Alawites, with their distinct religion and strong, though disordered, tribal structure.

---

[10] Allen Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 1.

[11] Ibid. p. 3.

[12] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 283.

A critical moment in the development of Alawite ʻasabiyya had occurred in 1305, when they were designated as heretics and enemies of Islam by the well known Sunni jurist, Ahmed ibn Taymiyya, a figure whose memory is cursed by Alawites to this day. He was, for example, described to this author by an Alawite religious leader (*shaykh*) as "corrupted, a liar and a miscreant."[13] It was largely due to Ibn Taymiyya's negative categorization of the Alawites that they suffered regular violent persecution, and constant discrimination for the duration of Mamluk and Ottoman imperial rule from 1305 to 1918. This legacy of repression firmed Alawite self reliance and particularism, in a way that fits Ibn Khaldun's definition of ʻasabiyya, except, for the Alawites, it was a sectarian rather than a tribal or social ʻasabiyya. Hence in 1970, when the Alawite, Hafiz al-Asad, captured power in Damascus and founded an 'unlikely'[14] dynasty in modern Syria, it was with the help of his community's sectarian ʻasabiyya. Although the Syrian government is officially a Ba'athist republic, there can be little doubt that real political power rests solely with the Asad family.[15] A *faux pas* by a young girl on Syrian national television in 2002, poignantly demonstrated the thin republican façade when after a violin lesson she thanked Syria's "royal family" for its patronage.[16] At the moment of this writing, the second generation of the Asad dynasty still holds power in Syria.

The following is a brief introduction to the geography, demography, religion and society of the Alawites of Syria. Syria's Alawites are part of the broader Arab Alawite community of approximately four million people,[17] who

---

[13] Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, interview with this author, Antakya, March 29, 2011.

[14] For example Daniel Pipes described it as "like an untouchable becoming maharajah in India or a Jew becoming Tsar in Russia." Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria, The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 175.

[15] This was a view shared by former Lebanese Foreign Minister, Elie Salem, Interview with the author, Balamand, Lebanon, March 16, 2011.

[16] *New York Times*, January 21, 2002.

[17] It is impossible to determine exact population figures for the Alawites as there is not any recent census data on sect in Syria, Lebanon or Turkey. This rough figure is arrived at by combining estimations of the Turkish, Syrian and Lebanese Arab Alawites. The Alawite population of the Turkish provinces of Adana and

mostly live in the north-eastern arc of the Mediterranean littoral, between northern Lebanon and the Cilician Plain in Turkey. The Syrian Alawites are easily the largest of the Alawite populations, comprising twelve to fifteen percent of the Syrian population, or approximately three million people.[18] The Alawites are concentrated in north-western Syria, with major populations in Latakia and Tartous. There are also Alawite populations in Damascus and on the fringes of cities such as Homs and Hama. The majority of Alawites, however, remain resident in numerous small villages in and around the Jabal Sahiliyah (coastal mountains).

The Syrian Alawite community is divided among four main tribal confederations, the Khayatin, Matawira, Haddadin and the Kalbiyya to which the Asad family belongs (see Table 1. and Figure 3). Each of these confederations contain several sub-tribes. The Khayatin tribes are concentrated in the south of the Jabal Sahiliyah and around the Kabir River that follows the Lebanese border. The Matawira are numerous to the north and east of Latakia extending to the Turkish border in the north and in the south around Masyaf. The Haddadin, traditionally the most influential of the tribal confederations before the rise of the Asads, are predominant in the coastal regions around Tartous, Banyas, Jablah and Latakia. Finally, the Kalbiyya tribes centre on the Asad hometown of Qurdaha and the Jablah, Haffa and Latakia districts.[19] Another branch of the Alawite sect is the Murshidis, who formed a sub-sect from the 1920s (see figure 3).[20]

Mersin was estimated at between 247,000 and 329,000 in 2000 by Prozchazka & Prozchazka, 2010, p. 59; Alawite informants in Antakya estimated the population of their community in the Hatay region in 2011 as approximately 500,000; the Lebanese Alawites numbered less than 100,000 see Yalbeck, 2008; The Syrian Alawite population is estimated at approximately 3,000,000; see note. 18.

[18] There has not been a Syrian census containing sectarian information since 1960. Demographer Onn Winckler argues however, that the Syrian Alawite population is possibly much higher than the usual estimate of 12 percent; see: Onn Winckler, *Arab Political Demography: Population Growth, Labor Migration and Natalist Policies*, 2nd ed. (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), p.34; see also Yahya Sadowski 'The Evolution of Political Identity in Syria,' in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, ed. S. Telhamy & M. Barnett, (London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 144.

[19] Peter Gubser, 'Minorities in Power: The Alawites of Syria,' in R.D. McLaurin, *The Political Role of Minority Groups in The Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1979), pp. 30-31; Fuad Khuri, Imams and Emirs:

Table 1. Tribal Demography of Syria's Alawites

Confederation	Pop. 1930~	1959	1970	2011
Kalbiyya	50,700	79,156	108,800 ~	480,000 ~
Khayatin	42,700	79,113	108,800 ~	480,000~
Haddadin	49,600	91,962	125,800 ~	560,000~
Matawira	46,200	94,421	129,200 ~	570,000~
No tribe/unknown	24,670	150,348	204,000 ~	900,000~
Total	213,870	495,000 (1960)	680,000	3,000,000~

Sources: Gubser, 1979; Winckler, 2009; E.J. Brill, 1927 (~ denotes estimate)

The Alawites are often considered an extremist (*ghulat*) break-away group from Shi'a Islam;[21] however, they consider themselves a legitimate school within Twelver Shi'a Islam.[22] In general, Alawite religious beliefs are highly syncretistic containing elements from Christianity and paganism along with a belief in metempsychosis (transmigration of the soul).[23] Alawites are relatively liberal compared to orthodox Muslims in terms of the role of religion in their daily lives. For instance, alcohol is permitted, Alawite women are not required to wear headscarves and can freely associate in public. Alawites have traditionally not been required to pray in mosques, believing that expression of faith is a personal act. Instead, shrines of Alawite 'saints' and holy men act as focal points for

---

State, Religion and Sects in Islam (London: Saqi, 1990), p. 55. Xavier de Planhol, *Minorités En Islam, Géographie Politique et Sociale* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), p. 87.

[20] See Gitta Yaffe & Uriel Dann, 'Suleiman al-Murshid: Beginnings of an Alawi Leader,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct. 1993), pp. 624-640.

[21] See Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

[22] That the Alawites strongly consider themselves part of the Shi'a tradition was reinforced in interviews with three separate Alawite Shaykhs conducted in Antakya, Turkey in March 2011; See also, Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayrī – 'Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010) .

[23] These features of Alawite religion were confirmed to the author in interviews with Alawite shaykhs in Antakya in March 2011.

Alawite religious devotion.[24] Their principal point of difference from Twelver Shi'a is their elevation of the fourth caliph, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and his descendents, the Imams of *Ahl al-Bayt* (People of the House of the Prophet Muhammad) to divine status.[25] This aspect of Alawite religion has been the main reason they have been accused of heresy by orthodox Sunnis and extremism (*ghulaw*) by orthodox Twelver Shi'a Muslims.[26]

A primary problem for the Alawites for most of their history has been the outward mysteriousness of their religious identity. Alawite religious ambiguity has confused observers and produced suspicion among political authorities for centuries. The academic literature on the religion of the Alawites remains limited[27] and often polemic.[28] Alawites are understandably sensitive about how their religion is portrayed. When this author asked the Alawite shaykh Muhammad Boz for permission to publish the contents of an interview with him, he agreed but urged me to emphasise that "the Alawites love God, we love all the Prophets: Muhammad, Jesus, Moses, all are the same, [we make] no discrimination between Sunnis, Christians, or Jews."[29] This research does not seek to resolve theological questions around the Alawite religion, good research in this area has already been conducted by scholars of theology.[30] For this study, the fact that confusion has

---

[24] A thorough study of these aspects of Alawite religious customs was conducted by Prochazka-Eisl and Prozchazka, *The Plain of Saints and Prophets, The Nusayri-Alawi Community of Cilicia (Southern Turkey) and its Sacred Places* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).

[25] Alawites believe 'Ali ibn Abi Talib to be the closest reflection of the divinity of God on Earth. This is however a complex issue. The Alawite concept of divinity is very abstract and, as Yaron Friedman suggests, is reflective of Neo-platonic thought. See Friedman, 2010, pp. 72-73

[26] The Alawites vehemently deny this accusation of extremism and make a comparison to the Christian elevation of Jesus to divine status, Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, interview with the author, Antakya, March 29, 2011. The most comprehensive study yet published on Alawite religion is: Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofksy, *The Nusayri-'Alawī Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[27] The main works include, René Dussaud, 1900; Samuel Lyde 1860; Bar Asher & Kofsky, 2003; Yaron Friedman, 2010; see also chapters in Matti Moosa, 1988; Fuad Khuri, 1990; Tord Olsson, 1998.

[28] This point is well noted by Tord Olsson, 1998, p.176.

[29] Interview with the author, Antakya, Turkey, March 28, 2011.

[30] See for example, Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofksy, *The Nusayri-'Alawī Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

long existed about the nature of Alawite religious identity is an important factor in understanding their sectarian insecurity.

The social structure of the Alawite community has been influenced most by their political and religious marginalisation in the Muslim world, which excluded them from urban areas. Since the beginning of the eleventh century the sect was overwhelmingly rural and poor. The main division in the community up to twentieth century was between the peasants of the coastal and inland plains[31] and the mountaineers of the Jabal Sahiliyah.[32] The former were mostly indentured labour to Sunni landlords whereas the Alawite mountaineers were strongly tribalistic and fiercely independent.[33] Overall, the community was essentially egalitarian with little vertical class stratification. The Alawite community was for a long time, however, deeply divided by strong loyalties to localised tribal groups, which kept the community fragmented and incoherent. The diffuse structure of the community is shown by their erratic tribal distribution, which was a result of the precipitous and discontinuous topography of the Jabal Sahiliyah (see figures 2-3).

Into the modern period the Alawite community's poor rural condition, egalitarian social structure and history of religious discrimination meant that their ideological inclination was towards secularism and socialism.[34] This explains the popularity of the Ba'ath Party among Alawites from the mid-1950s. This general trend continued into the 1970s; however, the emergence of Hafiz al-Asad's regime brought the first signs of class divisions in the community as his Kalbiyya tribe

---

[31] See table 1. p. 8, "No tribe/unknown."

[32] Gubser, 1979, p. 19; Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendents of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 12, 188.

[33] De Planhol, 1997, pp. 87-89.

[34] The most comprehensive study on the political and economic preferences of Syria's rural peasantry, including the Alawites, is Batatu, 1999, pp. 3-191; Fuad Khuri, *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam* (London: Saqi Books, 1990) p. 75; on Alawite ideology see also Ziadeh, 2011, p. 16; Maoz, 1997, p. 220.

benefited disproportionately to other tribes.[35] Although only a general rule, Alawite elites have tended to belong to the Asads' Kalbiyya tribe or the Haddadin tribe of Hafiz al-Asad's wife, Anisa. Nonetheless, apart from Asad's brother Rifa'at who favoured more right-wing economic and political policies, the vast majority of the Alawite community, including the elite, remained strongly socialist in their ideology. Alawite urbanisation accelerated greatly in the 1970s, although most maintained a dual existence between the metropolitan centres and their home villages. Therefore, for most Alawites, any social/ideological impact of urbanisation was offset by the retention of strong rural ties.

From the 1990s, and particularly after 2000 with the ascension to the presidency of Bashar al-Asad, the Alawite community started to become more stratified in terms of class and ideology. Many of the children of the Alawite political elite grew up in a privileged urban environment, were educated abroad and lost touch with the rural, socialist and egalitarian character of the rest of the community.[36] Bashar al-Asad himself typified this new generation of elite Alawites and began implementing liberal economic reforms, which had the effect of enlarging social/class division within the Alawite community.

While specific knowledge of their religion may have dwindled among many Alawites, from the 1970s sectarian affiliation became the strongest source of commonality for Alawites who had previously been divided along tribal lines.[37] So while disparities in ideology, wealth and status undoubtedly emerged over time among the Alawite community, the Asad regime, as Alawites, remained firmly connected to the rest of their community who look to the regime to provide for their security.

---

[35] See, pp. 194-197 of this work. The Kalbiyya tribe of the Asads is a sub-tribe of the wider 'Kalbiyya confederation' of the same name. See Gubser, 1979, p. 30.

[36] Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*. (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005) pp. 62-63.

[37] Torstein Worren suggests that it is the fact that many Alawites know very little about their own religion actually buttresses their sectarian identity relative to other communities, T. Worren, 'Fear and Resistance,' Masters Thesis, 2007; see also Gubser, 1979, p. 22.

In terms of academic and political significance, the Syrian Alawites are one of the most intriguing sub-state groups today. The Alawites are seriously understudied in all forms of social science.[38] Not one academic monograph on Syrian Alawite politics has been produced. While there are undoubtedly equally unknown ethno-religious groups,[39] none have political importance to compare with the Alawites. Since 1963 Alawites played an important part in establishing and preserving the Syrian domestic political structure, from top regime figures down to the rank and file of the large Syrian military security apparatus. In turn, the Syrian state is pivotal in regional affairs, including the Israeli-Palestinian issue, Lebanon and Iraq's political instability, and Iranian strategic interests. Thus, the Syrian Alawites are important to the study of international relations and foreign policy. Equally important however, is the need to study the Syrian Alawites in terms of conflict studies. There is an urgent need to advance understanding about communal tensions in Syria, the potential for civil conflict, and what this reveals about sectarian conflict in general.

Ironically, as the Alawites became more important politically the community actually became less subject to scrutiny. In late Ottoman times the Alawites seemingly had little political significance, yet several in-depth studies of the community were conducted by Westerners.[40] But since the 1960s, as Alawites assumed real importance in Syrian political affairs, virtually no in-depth research has been conducted on the politics of the Alawite community.[41] Another feature that adds to the intriguing nature of the Alawites is the fact that, despite their

[38] Although some attention has been paid to the theology and history of the Alawites in recent years, see: Bar Asher & Kofsky, 2003; and Friedman, 2010.

[39] One Middle East example is the Yezidi people of northern Iraq.

[40] For example: Rev. Samuel Lyde, *The Asian Mystery Illustrated in the History, Religion, and Present State of The Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria*, (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1860); Lieutenant F. Walpole, *The Ansayrii (or Assassins) with Travels In The Further East in 1850-51*, Parts One - Three, (London: Richard Bentley, 1851); Rene Dussaud, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairies*, (Paris: Bouillon, 1900).

[41] One exception is the Masters thesis of Torstein Schiøtz Worren, 'Fear and Resistance: The Construction of Alawi Identity in Syria,' Master Thesis, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, February 2007.

political significance, the majority of the community remains poverty stricken and backward in their socio-economic development. Despite the difficulties and limitations of conducting political research in Syria, this study hopes to provide an advance in modern research about the Alawites.

The scope and structure of this study encompasses the great part of Alawite history. It begins with the colourful career of the inspiration for the Alawite sect, Muhammad ibn Nusayr, in ninth century Iraq and ends with the rising challenge to Asad rule in early 2011. This timeframe is structured into four main parts related to Ibn Khaldun's paradigm of the rise and fall of dynasties based on group 'asabiyya which are summarised as follows,

1) In what way does a group develop high levels of 'asabiyya?

2) What effect does a group with high 'asabiyya have on politics and the formation of states or dynasties?

3) How is a group's 'asabiyya maintained by a state or dynasty?

4) How does a group's 'asabiyya decline in subsequent generations of a dynasty?

First of all, chapter one outlines and explains the choice of a qualitative inductive methodological approach for this study. Chapter two fully elaborates the theoretical grounding of this work, including Ibn Khaldun's cyclical theory of the rise and decline of dynasties. The concept, 'the politics of sectarian insecurity' is related to the literature, the case of the Alawites, and possible wider implications.

Chapter three will address how Alawite 'group feeling' developed. In other words, how did the Alawite community come to possess qualities that Ibn Khaldun would describe as high levels of 'asabiyya? In addition, the question of how they developed into a condition of *umran badawi* (rural/nomadic or 'wild') is important to explaining the progression of Alawite history. The period covered in

the third chapter begins with the sect's inception in Iraq in the mid-ninth century, spans their relocation from Iraq and establishment in the coastal mountains of Syria, and ends with the start of Ottoman decline in Syria from the 1830s. The origins of Alawite sectarian insecurity are located within this period and the main episodes of persecution, which caused the emergence of this insecurity, are explained.

Chapter four will examine how high levels of Alawite sectarian insecurity affected their relations with other communities and their integration into Syrian society as the modern Syrian state emerged. This period, beginning from 1832, encompasses the Ottoman decline and collapse, the French involvement of 1919-1946, and Alawite involvement in independent Syria up to the rise of Hafiz al-Asad's capture of power in 1970. The main proposition of this chapter is that the Alawites sought to integrate with wider Syrian society but their sectarian insecurity as well as Sunni chauvinism was an obstacle to any true integration. From the mid-1960s, the 'politics of sectarian insecurity' began to take hold in Syria as the various communities came to suspect each other of sectarianism. Ultimately, Alawite insecurity equated to high levels of 'asabiyya, which Hafiz al-Asad, having established his superiority, used effectively to his political advantage.

How Hafiz al-Asad maintained the 'asabiyya of the Alawite community is addressed in chapter five. Ibn Khaldun's main variable for the successful consolidation of a new dynasty is that, "A dynasty rarely establishes itself firmly in lands with many different tribes and groups."[42] According to this assessment the prospects for the entrenchment of Hafiz al-Asad's rule in the diverse Syrian state were not good. It is argued in this chapter that the politics of sectarian insecurity between the Sunni and Alawite communities caused Alawite 'asabiyya to remain high. The Asad regime's struggle with the Sunni Islamist Muslim

[42] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p.130.

Brotherhood in 1976-1982, was the main cause for the persistence of Alawite insecurity. The conflict was the turning point for Alawite hopes for true integration into Syrian society. Spiralling sectarian hostility led to catastrophe at the city of Hama in 1982, where as many as 20,000 people lost their lives. Consequently Asad rule was consolidated and Syria descended into political repression, which the Alawite community played the major role in enforcing.

In relation to Ibn Khaldun's theory that a group's ʻasabiyya declines in subsequent generations of dynasties,[43] chapters six and seven examine the succession and first decade of Bashar al-Asad's rule. It is shown that all of the factors that Ibn Khaldun said would lead to the decline of dynasties emerged under Bashar al-Asad. These include: "When rulers seek the help of clients and followers" outside of their group;[44] when a ruler, who has inherited power, is not well equipped in the art of statecraft;[45] the emergence of "exaggerated harshness" by the dynasty;[46] and "commercial activity on the part of the ruler [...] harmful to his subjects and ruinous to the tax revenue."[47] Despite the pertinence of all these factors to the rule of Bashar al-Asad, his grip on power remained strong because of the resilience of Alawite ʻasabiyya. The Syrian uprising that erupted against the Asad regime in March 2011 would, however, thoroughly test the ʻasabiyya of the Alawite community.

In the early afternoon of March 25, 2011, anti-government demonstrations first broke out in the normally quiet Syrian coastal city of Latakia. In the city's main boulevard protesters hurled projectiles at a towering bronze statue of a man with outstretched hands. The statue, a symbol of political supremacy in Syria, was an image of the former Syrian President, Hafiz al-Asad. This writer was near the

[43] Ibid. p. 246.

[44] Ibid. p.146.

[45] Ibid. p.149.

[46] Ibid. p.152.

[47] Ibid. p.232.

boulevard with an Alawite acquaintance from a village in the mountains behind the city. As we moved quickly away from the crowd, amid the noise of chanting and shop roller doors careening downwards, I observed a look of shock and dread in my companion who had tears pouring down his face. I knew that he, like most Syrians in 2011, was very hard pressed economically and did not benefit in any tangible way from the political system that was being challenged by the protesters. So what was the source of my Alawite companion's distress? Was it genuine affection for the Asad regime; inherent communal solidarity; or sectarian insecurity and fear? Exploring this question became vital to understanding the essential nature of Alawite politics.

Shortly after arriving in Turkey from Latakia in March 2011, I discussed the anti-regime protests with prominent members of the Antakya Alawite community. Shaykh Muhammad Boz clearly demonstrated Alawite anxieties about the intentions of the Sunni community:

> For us there is no difference between Sunni, Shi'a, Alawite and Jews. There is no difference – it's the will of God […] for us there is no problem. But for the Sunnis there are problems […] The Sunnis don't like the Alawites […] the Sunni only like the Sunni. You tell them this one is Alawite and they will tell you he is not a Muslim. [Now] the people of the Sunna profess that [Bashar al-Asad] does not treat everyone the same way and *because* he is Alawite they don't want him.[48]

This perspective exhibited the sectarian insecurity of Alawites with regards to the Sunni community and implied that the uprising was driven by Sunni sectarianism. However, Shaykh 'Ali Yeral demonstrated a divergent interpretation of the revolt as a non-sectarian push for democratic political change:

---

[48] Shaykh Muhammad Boz, interview with the author, March 28, 2011, Antakya, Turkey.

> [The conflict in Syria] is not between communities but people want liberty and freedom [and] a decent life. We [the Alawites] hope from God the merciful that there is neither danger for the Alawites or for the Sunnis [...] we pray from God that the Arab people move toward freedom and democracy without killing each other and without spilling blood. [There is] need for rapprochement, for dialogue, entente and discussion, not fighting and misunderstanding.[49]

As this research was being completed the outcome and implications of the Syrian uprising remained unclear. One thing is certain: the Alawite community and its ongoing ʻasabiyya in support of the Asad dynasty is the most important factor to the outcome. In short, if Alawite loyalty to the Asad regime remains intact Syria may descend into civil war. If Alawites abandon their support to the regime, a truly pluralist Syria could emerge from the collapse of Asad rule. In order to understand how the Syrian Alawites arrived at this critical juncture requires a thorough examination of Alawite political history. First, it is necessary to explain the methodology and theory that guided this study.

[49] Shaykh ʻAli Yeral, interview with the author, March 28, 2011, Antakya, Turkey.

Chapter One

A Qualitative Inductive Research Method

The research journey that led to this text was both challenging and fascinating. The course of this journey took me from New Zealand to Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, England and France. Alongside the challenge of needing to learn colloquial Syrian Arabic, I had a Paris meeting with a high profile Syrian exile, witnessed some of the first major anti-regime demonstrations in Syria for three decades, was apprehended by Syrian intelligence, and enjoyed the rare privilege of interviewing (in Arabic) three eminent Shaykhs of Alawite religion. These are only some of the experiences involved in this research process; their part in the overall methodology will be recounted below. First of all it is necessary to discuss the primary research method employed in this research and why it was chosen.

During the research period (2008 – 2011) my ability to compile data and sources was limited by two factors. First, the Alawites have always been somewhat marginal and enigmatic, which means that there is little detailed information about them in historical literature. The second factor is that since the Syrian Ba'athist revolution of 1963, discussion of sect or ethnicity, in a political sense, has been strictly forbidden under Syrian law. This restricted my ability to collect data in Syria. Considering these limitations, qualitative analysis of available primary and secondary data was the only appropriate method. Moreover, the study of intangible concepts such as group solidarity ('asabiyya) and insecurity necessitates a qualitative and interpretive approach.

An ideal situation for a researcher is to be able to gather information using a variety of methods from a variety of sources. This may involve surveys, key informant interviews, examination of public information and archives, and a survey of a well established literature. It was not possible to employ most of these

methods in Syria and the literature on the Syrian Alawites is relatively small. The main research tools used were: key informant interviews outside Syria; field observations and anonymous conversations inside Syria; extensive analysis of primary documents and news sources; and a critical survey and re-synthesis of the existing literature. Together these sources provided sufficient material to allow me to address the research questions.

In searching for answers on questions of human behaviour and interaction, social science scholars are always dealing with complex, fluid and ever evolving subjects. Political scientists, for instance, seek answers to questions of "power, coalition and exchange,"[1] all of which are abstract concepts, subject to constant change. This dynamic of change and malleability is indeed the only permanent feature of social science; there is no 'end of history.'[2] Hence the primary goal of qualitative research is to make a convincing argument based on a 'cogent interpretation' of numerous relevant sources. The resulting conclusions cannot, however, be presented as concrete absolutes, as would be the claim of quantitative tests, but rather, carefully and thoughtfully constructed assessments based on weight of evidence.[3]

The Alawite community has been an elusive subject for chroniclers, religious scholars and political authorities for around a thousand years. It had to be accepted therefore that detailed and credible information about this community would be difficult to acquire. In fact, it was difficult to even formulate the best questions to apply to the topic. Where was the appropriate starting point from which to approach such an obscure subject? What key themes needed to be explored in order to arrive at useful conclusions? Moreover, considering the paucity of historical and contemporary information about this people, was it wise

---

[1] Elliot W. Eisner, *The Enlightened Eye, Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998) p. 28.

[2] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' *The National Interest*, Vol.16, 1989, pp. 3-18.

[3] Eisner, 1998, p. 39.

to focus on narrow avenues of inquiry? These dilemmas led to the adoption of a qualitative inductive methodology.

Qualitative induction involves a broad analysis of numerous sources with a view to establishing categories which can then be arranged to inform the research objective.[4] Rather than searching for evidence of preconceived concepts, the source material was analysed against the Khaldunian framework (outlined on page 5) to identify themes and patterns that could be applied to the research questions. The point of view of the researcher was, of course, a major factor in what stood out from the sources; hence the constructivist view that knowledge and perspective are products of individual experience must be taken into account. A constructivist approach should still however, strive to attain a high level of objectivity. Both Ibn Khaldun and twentieth century philosopher, Bertrand Russell, provided arguments for this. In his *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun had this to say about research methodology:

> It often happens that people are (incredulous) with regard to historical information, just as it also happens that they are tempted to exaggerate certain information, in order to be able to report something remarkable [...] therefore, a person should look at his sources and rely upon himself. With a clear mind, and straightforward, natural (common sense) he should distinguish between the nature of the possible and the impossible. Everything within the sphere of the possible should be accepted, and everything outside should be rejected.[5]

Against the context of the horrors of World War Two, the positivist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote:

---

[4] David R. Thomas, 'A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data,' *American Journal of Evaluation*, Vol.27, No.1, March 2006, p. 5.

[5] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 146.

> In the welter of conflicting fanaticisms, one of the few unifying forces is scientific truthfulness, by which I mean the habit of basing our beliefs upon observations and inferences as impersonal, and as much divested of local and temperamental bias, as is *possible* for human beings [...] the habit of careful veracity acquired in the practice of this philosophical method can be extended to the whole of human activity, producing [...] a lessening of fanaticism with an increasing capacity for sympathetic and mutual understanding.[6]

The key aspect of Ibn Khaldun and Bertrand Russell's methodological approaches concerns their emphasis on maintaining an open, critical mind and making impersonal and unbiased inferences, as far as human beings are capable. Bertrand Russell seems to advocate an impossible aspiration to reach perfect objectivity, for, even if we must ultimately fail, the attempt will have improved the quality of the research. Thus, he acknowledges that human beings are in essence prisoners to their environmental and particular biases from which they can only strive to free themselves. As this research is qualitative the constructivist premise that the resulting research must, to some extent, be subjective must be acknowledged. The merit of a qualitative study is, however, improved by actively striving for objectivity.

In view of the turbulent and strongly contested nature of Middle East politics it seemed fitting to try and bring the detached and rational methodological philosophies of Ibn Khaldun and Bertrand Russell to what was a qualitative investigation. It was hoped that in this way a solid foundation could be laid for this study. It should be noted also that this research process was based in a location far distant from the subject of study. While this brought financial obstacles, intellectually, it was possibly an advantage. The turbulent nature of Middle East politics in general, produces strong emotions and opinions. Thus, in

---

[6] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Unwin University Books, 1946), p. 789, emphasis added.

maintaining an objective view of Middle Eastern politics, it could be said that New Zealand approximates the type of intellectual 'Archimedean point' suggested by the late scholar, Edward Said.[7]

Although Ibn Khaldun has been described as an "observant empiricist,"[8] his research approach also approximated an inductive method. According to French scholar Yves Lacoste, Khaldun would transform a "random collection of apparently unrelated and meaningless events into a coherent whole" through a "complex but logical evolution."[9] This is the type of task that confronted this writer. By collating and examining, often unrelated, sources over an extended period a picture began to emerge of the nature of Alawite politics.

Another major theme of Ibn Khaldun's methodological approach was his hypothesis that history is cyclical. His analogy of choice was the human life cycle, which "reflected the ancient Greek interpretation of the nature of history."[10] The belief that history is cyclical is evident in all of his theories especially relating to politics and the rise and decline of dynasties. It is understandable why Ibn Khaldun subscribed to a cyclical view of history; in his lifetime and in the centuries prior to it, many dynasties fell, only to be replaced by new dynasties. In the modern context this approach has limitations as a means for understanding politics. For instance, although the Asad regime can be described as a dynasty, there is no guarantee that a similar system will emerge to replace it.

My main research objective was to identify and explain the political evolution and situation of the Syrian Alawites within the framework of Khaldunian 'asabiyya. Towards this goal, using the inductive method and the theoretical framework of Ibn Khaldun, I went through multiple stages of broad

---

[7] Edward Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered,' cited in *The Geopolitics Reader*, ed. O'Tuathail (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 251.

[8] Zaid Ahmad, *The Epistemology of Ibn Khaldun* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 159-160.

[9] Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of Third World* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 63.

[10] Lucas Ashworth, "Ibn Khaldun and the Origins of State Politics," in *Postcolonialism and Political Theory*, ed. N. Persram (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007) p. 44.

inquiry and explored different social, political and geographic aspects of Alawite history. Several key themes emerged from this process, including for example: the frequent repression and persecution of the community; the reduction of the community into rural isolation; evidence of a community trait of pragmatism, and geographic factors for the community's survival and [lack of] development. The most important theme that stood out however, from my inductive inquiry was the concept of sectarian insecurity. How sectarian insecurity was instilled and how it manifests in Alawite politics, therefore, became a key aspect to explore in examining the main research objective.

The process of searching for the best way to study the Alawites was complex and challenging, and I often wondered why I had chosen such a difficult topic. Topics with easily accessible primary sources and more extensive literatures may seem attractive; economists for example, like to advance the 'low hanging fruit' principle of looking to take advantage of easy options.[11] Nevertheless, the area of study that I chose is a good example of how topics, which are less accessible, and seemingly less feasible, should be studied to the fullest extent possible. It is often the case that those topics, which are most difficult, are in most need of academic attention.

Sources and how they were obtained

The sources used in this study fell into four main categories: key informant interviews, field observations, news sources and documents, and existing literature. These sources, their importance and how they were obtained is outlined below. Any limitations facing the research process are incorporated with the discussion of each research component, rather than in a separate section.

Interviews

Six key informant interviews were conducted, two in 2009 and four in 2011. On May 12, 2009, I interviewed German judge, Detlev Mehlis who headed the United

[11] Bernanke and Frank, *Principles of Economics*, Third ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), p. 49.

Nations Independent International Investigation Commission (UNIIIC) into the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq al-Hariri, in 2005. The investigation and the subsequent establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) in the Netherlands, was a major threat to the Asad dynasty in the latter half of the 2000s and therefore, a major concern in modern Alawite politics. This interview was conducted at the University of Otago in New Zealand.

On September 16, 2009 I conducted an extensive interview with former Syrian foreign minister and vice president, Abd al-Halim Khaddam. A Sunni from Banyas, Khaddam was involved at the highest levels of Syrian politics for forty two years and was a long-time friend and confidante of Hafiz al-Asad. His career and experience of the Asad regime and Syrian politics in general, corresponded with a critical period in Alawite history as individuals from that community rose to political prominence. Although some commentators claim he has a political agenda,[12] his credibility as a source is supported by many; for example, Lebanese economist Marwan Iskandar wrote in 2006:

> At age 77, Khaddam has put his life in harm's way by expressing his opinions. For such an intelligent, healthy and far sighted senior statesman, such an initiative cannot but emanate from a feeling of historical responsibility [...] he is only afraid that his generation failed to advance the Arab nation.[13]

Another statement of Abd al-Halim Khaddam's veracity came from Judge Detlev Mehlis who interviewed Khaddam in December 2005. Mehlis' legal credentials qualify him to comment on the reliability of Khaddam's testimony:

---

[12] Judge Mehlis acknowledged to this writer that Abd al-Halim Khaddam no doubt has a political agenda but felt that this did not necessarily mean he was lying about his version of Syrian events. Mehlis used the comparison of Syrian regime figure, Rustom Ghazali, who was found clearly to be lying to the UNIIIC investigators.

[13] Marwan Iskandar, *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon* (London: Saqi, 2006), p. 225.

> [...] Khaddam, I think... what he said seemed to be true [...] he knows the system, he knows how the system works [...] he can explain things, functions, secrets, personalities of the players of the people [...] about their sentiments about their feelings [...] about the chain of command, about how the system works.[14]

In any case, the information obtained in the Abd al-Halim Khaddam interview gave a rare insight into the inner workings of the opaque Syrian political structure, and formed an important element of this research. The interview was secured after numerous attempts to contact Abd al-Halim Khaddam at his Paris residence where he has lived since his departure from Syria in 2005. The experience of meeting with Khaddam involved a great deal of security precautions; there is little doubt that he was a prime target following his accusations against the Asad regime for the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

In 2011 a further four key informant interviews were conducted. The first of these was with former Lebanese foreign minister and president of Balamand University, Elie Salem. This interview provided good information about the Lebanese perspective on the Asad dynasty and particularly its role in Lebanon. It was conducted on March 15, 2011 at Balamand University in northern Lebanon. Unfortunately the audio copy of this interview had to be deleted ten days later when I was apprehended by Syrian intelligence in Latakia. The main elements of the interview were reconstructed from memory after leaving Syria on March 26, 2011.

The other three interviews were conducted in Antakya, Turkey on March 28 and 29, 2011. The three interviewees were the Alawite Shaykhs Muhammad Boz, ‘Ali Yeral and Nasir Eski’ocak (all these interviews were conducted in Arabic). There is a significant Alawite population in and around Antakya, for whom these Shaykhs are important religious figures and community leaders.

[14] Detlev Mehlis, interview with the author, Dunedin, May 12, 2009.

Considering the difficulty of conducting such interviews in Syria, these interviews were invaluable. Although religious and historical issues were discussed, these three key informants also had a high level of knowledge and understanding of contemporary political issues concerning their co-sectarians in Syria. Moreover, by interviewing the three Shaykhs separately it gave the opportunity to triangulate their information on similar issues and gain an accurate and rare impression of Alawite perspectives. These interviews were secured with the help of Turkish contacts in Ankara and Antakya, whose help is greatly appreciated

Field Observations

The second main category of source material was field work in Syria. I made two trips to Syria in August 2009 and March 2011. Because of the Syrian government's restrictions on discourse about ethnicity and sect, fieldwork in Syria was mostly unstructured, observational and informal. My main goal in the field was to gather as much information as possible under the circumstances and gain a sense of the Alawite situation in Syria. Towards this goal, most of my time was spent in the north west of the country where the majority of Alawites reside. I divided my time between the urban areas, in particular Latakia, and the Alawite heartland, in and around the mountain range known as the Jabal Sahiliyah.

Primary observations in Syria were important in order to independently assess the socio-economic conditions and political proclivities of the Alawites in particular, but also for the country in general. I made numerous acquaintances among the Syrian Alawite community and from other communities. Although it was not safe to openly discuss political issues with these people, who shall all remain anonymous, I had many instructive conversations that helped inform my understanding of the topic.

In preparation for this important field research component it was necessary to engage in intensive Arabic language training. I had studied Arabic part-time since 2007; however, I increased my efforts in this area in the lead up to

both sets of field work in 2009 and 2011. My Arabic language skills were important as English is not widely spoken, especially in the rural areas of Syria. Even where people could speak English, the fact that I spoke Arabic was well received, and opened up opportunities to establish good contacts. Syrians are noted for their hospitality and this reputation is well deserved.

During both trips I endeavoured to take photographs of scenes and objects of interest to my topic. For example, I took photos around Hama to show the effects of the conflict there in 1982, and in the Jabal Sahiliyah, to show the landscape and socio-economic conditions. These images were important as I could not keep written notes which could have caused suspicion by the authorities if discovered. Unfortunately, on the second trip, the intelligence services confiscated my camera's memory card when I was apprehended on suspicion of being a journalist during anti-regime demonstrations in Latakia. Thus I am left with the images taken in 2009, some of which will be published in the thesis to illustrate certain points.

Another very important aspect of my field research, which is difficult to describe, was the ability to experience firsthand the building pressure within Syrian society in the latter part of the 2000s. There has been a repressive political climate in Syria for several decades, which creates a sense of distrust and suspicion between people who are afraid to speak or act freely. In recent years this 'heavy' atmosphere was exacerbated by rising socio-economic pressures caused by economic and environmental factors. In 2009 the pressure within Syrian society was palpable but in 2011, the results of this pressure became visible as countrywide demonstrations broke out simultaneous with my arrival in the country.

Overall, fieldwork in Syria was probably the most important qualitative aspect of the research process. While the data is difficult to quantify, as it is mainly based on impressions and all sources quoted are strictly anonymous, it provided

the necessary perspective in order to usefully interpret primary and secondary documentary sources and draw my own conclusions.

Primary Documents and News sources

As much as possible, I used primary documents in piecing together this text. The broad scope of the study however, and the time constraints of thesis work, inhibited my ability to focus intensely on any particular period. I wanted to locate, for example, further primary sources about the Alawites in the Ottoman period from the archives in Istanbul. As I discovered however, the archives were very difficult to access without sound knowledge of Ottoman Turkish. Moreover, their somewhat chaotic cataloguing meant that a great deal of time needed to be invested in order to produce worthwhile results. Hopefully such research on the Syrian Alawites will be pursued by specialist historians in the future. The primary documents I did obtain along with the news sources consulted are detailed below.

For the Ottoman period I obtained three documents with sections about the Syrian Alawites (Nusayris): chronicles of the Ottoman state in the late eighteenth century;[15] a chronicle of the Province of Suleyman Pasha al-'Adil, 1804-1819, complied by Ibrahim al-'Awra;[16] and *Lubnan: Mabahith Ilmiya wa Ijtima'iya*, compiled by Ismail Haqqi in 1918.[17] For the period 1920 – 1939, I consulted the relevant issues of the *League of Nations Official Journal*, with particular attention to the details of the Alawite State of 1922-1936. My examination of the period 1936 - 1969 relied on the existing literature, which I analysed and re-synthesised in view of my research objectives. Primary source material for the period from 1969-1999 was available in the form of newspaper archives, in particular, the *New York Times* and *The Times* of London. These two newspapers have very complete archives and reported regularly from Syria via correspondents including Thomas Friedman,

[15] Ibn Jibrail al-Qila'i, *Zajaliyyat* (Beirut: Dar Lahad Khatar, 1982).

[16] تاريخ ولاية سليمان باشا العادل ١٨٠٤-١٨١٩ (History of the Province of Suleyman al-'Adil, 1804-1819), Ibrahim al-'Awra, pp.205-206, translated by the author and Jean-Luc Payan, 2010.

[17] Ismail Haqqi, *Lubnan: Mabahith Ilmiya wa Ijtima'iya,* ed. Fuad Bustani from the 1918 original, 2 vols. (Beirut: Manshurat al-Jami'at al-Lubnaniyya, Qism al-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyya, 1970).

Susan Sachs and for *The Times*, Robert Fisk. For 2000 – 2004 the *Economist* and *Financial Times* periodicals contained useful reports on Syrian political developments.

From 2004 to 2007 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions and official documents of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) are cited alongside secondary sources. In the period 2007 – 2010 I compiled my own database of news sources as they were published. I consulted many different news sources therefore I will only mention the main ones. These recent newspaper sources can be placed in four categories: Syrian, Arab, Israeli and International.

The main Syrian news source was the English edition of the *Syrian Arab News Agency* (SANA) published daily online; others included *Cham Press*, and *Day Press News* (DPN). Monthly periodicals such as *Syria Today* were also cited. All of these news sources are either State run or operate under State supervision and therefore illustrate the perspective of the Syrian regime, however they cannot be relied on to publish impartial accounts of events. One Syrian news source, which did provide informative independent information, came from anonymous journalists operating on behalf of the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). The Syrian branch of this program was shut down in April 2010.

Of Arab news sources, the most valuable was the Lebanese newspaper, *The Daily Star*, which independently publishes daily news in English. Another often cited Lebanese source was the news website *Naharnet*. Other Arab news sources included the Saudi newspapers, *al-Hayat* and *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*. The Israeli newspapers *Ha'aretz* and *Jerusalem Post* were also useful in cross referencing reports of events. The former is a centrist publication, while the *Jerusalem Post* is relatively right wing in its editorial policy. Although Israeli news sources are generally focused on Israeli interests, they have a reasonable level of journalistic professionalism in reporting on events.

Frequently cited international news sources included the United States based, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Associated Press* (AP) and occasionally the

Los Angeles Times (LAT). European sources included *BBC news*, and *Agence France-Presse* (AFP). These sources generally produced similar Western perspectives in their reporting on Syrian events. Other international sources which displayed a different, more sympathetic perspective of the Syrian regime, included: The Iranian news website *Press TV*, and the Chinese news website *Xinhua*. Altogether, by cross referencing and, where possible, triangulating these news sources, a reasonable level of factual accuracy in dealing with the recent period from 2007 was produced.

Existing Research

There are no monographs focusing on the issue of Alawite political interests and their development. This study helps address this gap in the existing literature about the Alawites and Syria. The major works that have been produced on the Alawites have focused on theological aspects of the community and their early history.[18] In academic journals and book chapters there have been several examinations of Alawite politics in the modern period. A common theme among these studies, however, has been the assertion that the Alawites are a 'dominant minority' in Syria.[19] These studies have often adopted a top down approach focussing on the Asad dynasty with the Alawites positioned as its main pillar of support. The background and basis of that support and what holds it in place are not addressed adequately in the current literature. In this research I have therefore re-examined the literature with the goal of synthesising a new perspective of Alawite politics.

[18] Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayrī – 'Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofksy, *The Nusayri-'Alawī Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[19] See for example: Mahmud Faksh, 'The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.20, No.2 (April 1984), pp. 133-153; Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), pp. 429-450; E. Zisser, The 'Alawis, Lords of Syria: From Ethnic Minority to Ruling Sect; in Ofra Bengio & G. Ben-Dor, eds., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, (Boulder & London: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 1999), p. 137.

To construct research on the early period of Alawite history from 850-1300, I examined the works of several academics. The most important of these was the 2010 book, *The Nusayri-ʻAlawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* by Israeli scholar Yaron Friedman.[20] This book is a very timely contribution to the literature on the Alawites and gives some much needed substance to a formerly vague historical narrative of the Alawite sect. The book deals mainly with the religious development and identity of the Alawites up to the fourteenth century but also provides some comment on the supposed 'Sunni-Shi'i-Alawi triangle' of the contemporary Middle East.[21] Another important monograph on the Alawites by Israeli authors is the 2002 book, *The Nusayri-ʻAlawī Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy*, by Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofksy.[22] This book deals almost exclusively with the religion of the Alawites and thus served as a valuable reference on the religious development of the Alawites.

It is ironic, and perhaps unfortunate, that the Israelis are the most ardent students of the Syrian religious and political landscape, yet they are the most restricted in their ability to carry out field research. This writer acknowledges the contribution of Yaron Friedman and seeks to build on his work with the additional benefit of travel in the Syrian lands to observe the Alawites firsthand. The clarity that Friedman's work, in particular, has lent to the background and origins of the Alawites provides a valuable stepping stone for researchers to extend a thorough political analysis into the present day.

Further details about early Alawite history were found in the works of historian, Matti Moosa,[23] French geographer, Xavier de Planhol,[24] and historian

---

[20] Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayrī – ʻAlawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

[21] Ibid. see chapter. 3, pp.175-221.

[22] Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofksy, *The Nusayri-ʻAlawī Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturg* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[23] Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites, The Ghulat Sects* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

[24] Xavier de Planhol, *Minorités En Islam, Géographie Politique et Sociale* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), pp. 83-91.

Kais Firro.[25] The general political context of the Alawite early period is informed with the help of such works as, *The Formation of Islam, Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*, by historian Jonathan Berkey.[26]

This study brings together elements from these key works to construct a picture of early Alawite politics. This research's contribution to advancing this literature comes from incorporation of details about Alawite history obtained in interviews with the three Alawite Shaykhs mentioned above. For the Alawites there is a long tradition of passing down historical information through the community's religious leaders. In line with this study's research objectives, how the Alawites perceive their own history is very important to understanding how their politics evolved and in particular, the development of sectarian 'asabiyya.

The period between the fourteenth century and the nineteenth century is very murky in terms of details about the Alawite community. A very good account of an Alawite revolt around the coastal town of Jableh in the early fourteenth century, provided by historian Sato Tsugitaka,[27] gives a glimpse of the community's situation at that time. For the same period, the *futya* (singular: *fatwa*) of Ibn Taymiyya against the Alawites is examined by Yvette Talhamy.[28] Otherwise, for five centuries from 1318 to the mid 1800s there are serious gaps in the literature on the Alawites. Yaron Friedman cited this lack of sources as his reason for stopping his history at the fourteenth century.[29] This work was only able to span this gap by providing isolated details and discussing the general regional political context of the period to assess likely implications for the Alawites. Further research is required on this period.

---

[25] Kais M. Firro, 'The 'Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nusayrīya to Islam via 'Alawīya,' *Der Islam*, Vol.82, no.1, Walter de Gruyter, 2005.

[26] J.P. Berkey, *The Formation Of Islam, Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[27] Sato Tsugitaka, *State & Rural Society in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

[28] Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46: 2, 2010.

[29] Friedman, 2010, p.64.

In the mid-nineteenth century the Alawites re-emerge in the literature. European travellers, orientalists and missionaries like Lieutenant F. Walpole, Reverend Samuel Lyde, and Henry Jessup provide good firsthand accounts of the situation of the Alawites in the 1850s and 1860s, a period which was an extremely turbulent and difficult time for the community.[30] Then towards the end of the nineteenth century the French scholar, Rene Dussaud, produced a monograph about the Alawites,[31] which remained the seminal academic work about the community until the works of Bar Asher, Kofsky and Friedman in recent years. A major source for nineteenth century Alawite observers was a manuscript written in 1007, titled *The Book of Feasts*, attributed to the revered Alawite Shaykh Abu Said Maymoun Ibn Qasim al-Tabarani. This manuscript, which revealed a great deal about Alawite religion, came into the possession of Joseph Catafago who subsequently submitted it to the Prussian Consul-General and the *Journal Asiatique* in 1848.[32] Then in 1862 a book was published on Alawite religion by an Alawite convert to Protestantism named Suleiman Effendi al-Adhani.[33] While knowledge of the social situation and religious identity of the Alawites was greatly enhanced by these studies and discoveries, an enquiry into Alawite political structure and proclivities remains lacking for this period. How did cumulative Alawite marginalisation manifest in their political outlook in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire? In other words, what was the level of Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya at the end of the Ottoman rule?

In the first half of the twentieth century the main contributions to the Alawite literature include a study by French scholar Jacque Weulersse in the late

---

[30] Lieutenant F. Walpole, *The Ansayrii (or Assassins) with Travels In The Further East in 1850-51*(London: Richard Bentley, 1851); Rev. Samuel Lyde, *The Asian Mystery Illustrated in the History, Religion, and Present State of The Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria* (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1860); Reverend Henry H. Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria* (London: Fleming H. Revell, 1910).

[31] Rene Dussaud, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairies* (Paris: Bouillon,1900).

[32] For details of this transaction and an English translation of the document see Lyde, 1860, p. 282.

[33] For the English translation see: Edward E. Salisbury, 'First Ripe Fruit, Disclosing the Mysteries of the Nusairian Religion,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 8 (1866), pp. 227-308.

1930s. Weulersse drew some sound conclusions about the resilient nature of Alawite particularism, which can be related to their level of 'asabiyya.[34] Another very important contribution is Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann's study on the 1936 integration of the Alawite region with the nascent independent Syrian state.[35] Yaffe-Schatzmann's research shed light on the pragmatic process that Alawite leaders went through to arrive at the decision to support the community's integration with the majority Sunni, Syrian state. In piecing together the general political context of Syria in the early decades of the twentieth century, Philip Khoury and Stephen Longrigg provide thorough examinations of the French Mandate period.[36] Also, Hanna Batatu's seminal study on the rise of the Syrian peasant classes in the twentieth century includes a great deal of relevant detail and analysis on the Alawites.[37] On the background of important Alawite individuals such as Hafiz al-Asad, Patrick Seale's work is the major source.[38] A focused examination of the overall trajectory of Alawite politics in this period is, however, lacking. How did Alawite 'asabiyya evolve in this period and what was the political impact for the fledgling Syrian state?

For the latter half of the twentieth century, the main work relevant to the Syrian Alawites is Nikolaos Van Dam's detailed analysis of sectarianism in Syrian politics.[39] Van Dam provided excellent detail and explanation of the political dynamics occurring between various religious communities in Syria in the 1960s. Alawites were major players in this process and in 1970, emerged as the main

---

[34] Jacque Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites* (Tours: Arrault & Cie, Maitres imprimeurs, 1940), Thesis, University of Paris.

[35] Yaffe-Schatzmann, Gitta, 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 28-38.

[36] Phillip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism* (London: IB Taurus, 1987); Stephen H. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

[37] Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[38] Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria* (London: IB Taurus, 1988).

[39] Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (New York: IB Taurus, 1997).

pillar of the regime established by Hafiz al-Asad. This period was also well examined by Hanna Batatu and Alistair Drysdale.[40] However, there remained a need to view these events, in terms of the Alawite community's specific role. How exactly did Alawite 'asabiyya allow for the establishment of the Asad dynasty and how robust was this relationship?

After Hafiz al-Asad captured power in Syria in 1970, literature about the Alawites became appended to academic discourses about the nature and evolution of Asad rule. The community became absorbed under a conceptual 'umbrella' as a 'dominant minority' in support of the Asad dynasty by virtue of their common Alawite identity.[41] The Alawites ceased to be a subject of study in their own right. The capacity to conduct such studies was, no doubt, hindered by restrictions on sectarian discourse in Ba'athist Syria. Nonetheless, this work seeks to revise the common definition of the Alawites as the 'dominant minority' in Syria, if anything, the Alawites as a whole are the most isolated and at risk community in Syria today.

Another major factor in the academic neglect of the Alawites in the period 1970 – 2000, was the ascendancy, in academic circles, of wider questions including the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Lebanese civil war, and regional equations of the Cold War. The question of Alawite politics throughout this period should, however, have been one of academic urgency, especially in light of the Hama massacre in Syria of February 1982. The question of how and why Alawite support/'asabiyya was maintained by the Asad dynasty during this period is thus addressed in this study.

---

[40] Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), pp. 331-344; Alistair Drysdale, The Syrian Political Elite, 1966-76: A Spatial and Social Analysis, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.17, No.1, (Jan. 1981), pp. 3-31.

[41] Some prime examples of this idea are: Mahmud Faksh, 'The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.20, No.2 (April 1984), pp. 133-153; Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), pp. 429-450; Eyal Zisser, 'The 'Alawis, Lords of Syria: From Ethnic Minority to Ruling Sect,' in *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, eds., Ofra Bengio & G. Ben-Dor (Boulder & London: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 1999), p.137.

In the period since 2000, the literature on Syrian politics continued to neglect Alawite politics. Instead, preferred subjects have been the succession of Bashar al-Asad, the likelihood for survival of his regime, and the prospects for political and economic reform in Syria.[42] The critical role of the Alawites in maintaining the new generation of the Asad dynasty has not received adequate attention. The survival of the Asad dynasty is linked to continued Alawite support, which in turn, is dependent on whether Alawite 'asabiyya declines in line with Khaldunian theory.

Overall, the primary goal of this study has been to explain the nature and causes of Syrian Alawite politics, an undertaking which will fill a gap in the literature on Alawite and Syrian Politics. This work also advances the literature on the Syrian Alawites by bringing together the fragments of what is known of the Alawites into the most complete (as possible) historical account of this community yet achieved in Western academic literature.[43]

---

[42] See for example: Alan George, *Neither Bread Nor Freedom* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2003); David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*: *Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (Yale University Press, 2005) Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 2005); Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (New York: IB Taurus, 2007); Barry Rubin, *The Truth about Syria* (New York: Macmillan, 2007).

[43]A full history of the Alawites was produced in Arabic. See: Muhammad Amīn Ghālib al-Tawīl, *Ta'rīkh al-'Alawiyyīn* (Beirut: 1966). This account has been criticized by Yaron Friedman as being 'problematic' in terms of its sources and historic accuracy, see Yaron Friedman, 2010, p. 16, note. 40.

Chapter Two

Ibn Khaldun's Concept of 'Asabiyya and the Rise and Decline of Dynasties

Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun (d.1406) is considered one of the greatest thinkers of all time and is often touted as the originator of the social sciences history, sociology and philosophy.[1] Ibn Khaldun remains important to modern political science, in particular, chapter three of his *Muqaddimah* entitled, "On dynasties, royal authority, the caliphate, government ranks, and all that goes with these things."[2] It is here that Ibn Khaldun advances a comprehensive explanation of politics and the workings of states based on his study of history and observations from his own (highly eventful) lifetime.[3] His primary proposition was that "royal authority and large scale dynastic power are attained only through group feeling."[4] This premise has direct relevance to modern Syria where Hafiz al-Asad gained political power and established a family dynasty through the group feeling of his Alawite community. If Ibn Khaldun can in fact help explain the rise of the Asad dynasty, perhaps application of his theories can also point to its decline? Moreover, if 'group feeling' is the most important element in maintaining 'dynastic power,' there is very good reason to study the politics of Syria's Alawites through the conceptual framework of Ibn Khaldun in order to gain a new perspective on the durability and nature of the Asad-Alawite relationship. In

[1] Ronald A. Messier, 'The worlds of Ibn Khaldun: introduction,' *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol.13, No.3, September 2009, p. 275; On Ibn Khaldun's contribution to social science, see also, Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957).

[2] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, pp. 123-297.

[3] For a thorough recent account of Ibn Khaldun's life see, Allen Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

[4] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 123.

short, in order to better understand why modern Levantine politics, in many ways, still resembles medieval Maghrebian politics, it seems sensible to apply the ideas of a medieval Maghrebian theorist.

Ibn Khaldun would likely be bewildered at the globalised complexities of modern society and politics, but it is possible he would not feel entirely alien from the Middle East's modern dilemmas. The medieval Muslim world was beset by hostile interventions in the form of Crusaders and Mongols, which can be compared to the Israeli insertion and Western economic and military intrusions in the modern Arab world. Environmentally, climate change in recent times and the 'Little Ice Age' of the thirteenth century both caused great economic hardship.[5] Most importantly for this study, and partly as a result of the above factors, the medieval Maghreb was plagued by internal political fragmentation, factionalism and violent instability, once again, mirroring the contemporary Middle East. So Ibn Khaldun's attempts to understand the chaos of his times surely remain useful in explaining the contemporary Middle East.

The idea that a medieval political theory still holds relevance to the politics of modern Syria raises some important implications for the evolution of politics in the Middle East generally. For instance, why did Syria descend into 'Khaldunian' dynastic politics after the newly independent state initially strove for republican political pluralism? Similarly, the twentieth-century revolutionary aspirations of, for example, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Egypt, all descended into narrow nepotistic regimes that sought to dynastically monopolise political power.[6] The reasons for considering Ibn Khaldun a relevant political theorist for understanding modern Middle East politics only increased with the 'Arab Spring' upheavals. There is significant scope to consider Khaldunian explanations for the evolution of the

---

[5] Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 2008), pp. 135-136.

[6] For some in-depth studies of the politics of authoritarian succession, see, Volker Perthes, ed., *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change* (Boulder: Lynne Riener, 2004).

'Arab Spring.'[7] The regimes that have fallen in Libya, Tunisia and at least nominally in Egypt, were based on tribal or patronage based coalitions, which in terms of 'group feeling' were possibly relatively weak. Significantly, in each case the ruler belonged to the majority Sunni Muslim sect of those states. In Syria and Bahrain, however, the regimes have proven far more resilient. In both these cases the ruling family belong to a minority sect, the Asads are of course Alawite, and the al-Khalifa dynasty of Bahrain is Sunni but rules over a Shi'a majority.[8] Is it possible, therefore, that the 'group feeling' of the supporters of these dynasties is stronger than those of other regimes which have fallen? Of course other broader geopolitical and strategic explanations must be considered, such as the pivotal position of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, and it is possible Muammar Gaddafi could have held on in Libya if not for the NATO military intervention.[9] Nonetheless, there is a case to be made that the durability of the regimes in Bahrain and Syria can be explained by the resilience of sectarian 'asabiyya compared to tribal or patronage based social 'asabiyya. While outside the scope of the present study, there is rich potential for in-depth comparative study of these two states using a Khaldunian approach.

Ibn Khaldun subscribed to the ancient Greek idea of an unavoidable, cyclical history, analogous to the human life cycle.[10] Thus, to him, dynasties were natural elements of an organic political cycle, and they would rise and fall depending on their level of 'group feeling.' The case of the Alawites shows that there is a need to augment Ibn Khaldun's theories to take into account the effects of sectarian fear and insecurity, which seem to create an obstacle to the 'natural'

---

[7] Fouad Ajami, 'The Arab Spring at One,' *Foreign Affairs* (March/April, 2012), Vol. 91, Issue 2, pp. 56-65.

[8] Like Syria, demographic data related to sect is not available in Bahrain. It is estimated that the country is 70 percent Shi'a, which would leave 12 percent Sunnis, 9 percent Christians and 9 percent 'others.' Long, Reich, Gasiorowski, (eds.) *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2007), pp. 166-167.

[9] Dadlder & Stavridis, 'NATO's Victory in Libya,' *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2012), Vol. 91, Issue 2, p. 2-7.

[10] Ashworth, 2007, p. 44.

decline of 'group feeling.' Before going any further it is necessary to adopt a working definition of 'asabiyya and explain how it can be applied to groups with a sectarian identity.

A Definition of 'Asabiyya and its Sectarian Dimension

'Asabiyya (عصبية) is a complex and difficult concept to define and there is not an entirely satisfactory translation for the word in English.[11] The root of the term 'asabiyya, could be found in the consonants *-s-b* (ص ب -), meaning 'to bind,'[12] for instance the word *'asaba* (عَصَبَ) means to tie, fold, bind or wrap. The word *'asab* (عَصَب), means nerve or feelings.[13] Al-Mawrid Arabic dictionary lists a noun containing the same root, *'usbaya* (عُصْبية) which is defined as a league, union, coterie, clique, circle, set, group or troop.[14] It is understandable therefore, how Franz Rosenthal arrived at his literal translation of 'asabiyya as 'group feeling.'[15] It is important however, to understand the distinction between an innate 'group feeling' and Ibn Khaldun's intended meaning of the term. According to the *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet), Muhammad was asked, "Does 'asabiyya mean loving ones people?" to which he replied, "No, 'asabiyya means helping one's people in unjust actions."[16] This definition suggested a conception of 'asabiyya, which was not an unconditional attachment as would be suggested by the phrase 'loving ones people' but rather a pragmatic political mobilisation of a group.

The general consensus among scholars of Ibn Khaldun is that 'asabiyya is a notion that relates directly to the activation of latent tribal solidarity, or 'blood

---

[11] See A. al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldun: An Essay in Reinterpretation* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2003), p. 150, for a discussion on the limitations of English translations of the original Khaldunian texts, and Muhsin Mahdi, 1957, p. 196, n. 1, for a discussion of the various interpretations of 'asabiyya.

[12] Lacoste, 1984, p. 103.

[13] **المورد القريب** (Al-Mawrid al-Quareeb, Pocket Arabic Dictionary), 2008, p. 278.

[14] Ibid. p. 278.

[15] Rosenthal replaced the word 'asabiyya with the phrase 'group feeling' throughout his translation of Ibn Khaldun's *al-Muqaddimah* (Introduction to History).

[16] Cited in Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of Third World* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 103.

ties,' for the achievement of political ends.[17] Thus 'asabiyya refers to something other than just a group psychology based on shared kinship. 'asabiyya refers to how 'group feeling' acts on the formation and endurance of states or dynasties. A group with high 'asabiyya has the potential to give rise to, and strongly support, a dynasty; then as the group's 'asabiyya declines the dynasty becomes weak and vulnerable. There is no reason to suspect that 'asabiyya cannot operate in the same way for groups with a common religious identity. For this study 'asabiyya equates to: *the potential or actual level of cohesion a group has in support of a dynasty or state.*

Scholars Yves Lacoste and Fuad Khuri have already raised the need to incorporate sectarian 'asabiyya into the Khaldunian framework.[18] According to Lacoste, a dynasty that is founded on sectarian 'asabiyya is defined as a "politico-religious dynasty."[19] Before the fourteenth century there was a significant amount of religious heterogeneity between the tribal groups of North Africa, this led to the establishment of politico-religious dynasties who enjoyed "common superstructure[s]" of religious particularism.[20] This heterogeneity was largely displaced by increasing levels of religious orthodoxy during the lifetime of Ibn Khaldun, and according to Lacoste, "later dynasties displayed none of the religious particularism that had cemented together the earlier kingdoms [...] tribes, chieftains and ministers could switch their loyalties much more easily than before."[21]

Thus, it seems that religio-political dynasties in fact retained 'asabiyya more effectively than tribal dynasties. A good example of this was the Ismaili Shi'ite Fatimid dynasty who maintained a dynasty based in Egypt between the tenth and twelfth centuries. A common religious identity can also bring together

---

[17] Al-Azmeh, 2003, pp. 30,171; See also, Lacoste, 1984, p. 116.

[18] Yves Lacoste, 1984, p. 90; Fuad Khuri, *Imams and Emirs, State, Religion and Sects in Islam* (London: Saqi Books, 1990), p. 52.

[19] Khuri, 1990, p. 52; ibid, p. 90.

[20] Ibid. p. 89.

[21] Ibid. p. 90.

disparate tribes under a single ‘asabiyya. According to the Khaldunian discourse, “Even if a [group] has many houses” and an internal diversity, there may exist a group feeling that is “stronger than all other group feelings […] and makes them subservient, and in which all the diverse group feelings coalesce [...] to become one greater group feeling.”[22]

How a Group Develops High ‘Asabiyya

Although Ibn Khaldun outlines the necessary group characteristics for a dynasty to rise out of a group, he did not dwell on how those characteristics came about. He does say that, “The more firmly rooted in desert habits and the *wilder* a group is, the closer does it come to achieving superiority over others....”[23] Therefore, an interpretation of the term ‘wilder’ as becoming further removed from society or civilization would suggest a progression toward developing strong ‘asabiyya. In general, however, Ibn Khaldun’s starting point in a cycle of a dynasty is a rurally based tribal group with high levels of ‘asabiyya.[24] This is not necessarily the original position of a group however; it is not always the case that rural tribal groups have always been that way. The case of the Alawites is a good example of how marginalised elements of society are moved onto the social and geographic periphery where they become ‘wilder’ and therefore develop the type of communal solidarity that Ibn Khaldun referred to as ‘asabiyya. Examining how a group develops the characteristics necessary for high ‘asabiyya is important to understanding a group’s overall political development. This is one area where this research seeks to extend Khaldunian theory.

The Nature and Influence of a Group with High ‘Asabiyya

Once established as a mutually identifying group by religion, tribe, or otherwise, the level of ‘asabiyya of the broad group indicates whether that group is capable

[22] Lacoste, 1984, p. 106.

[23] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muquddimah*, p. 107, emphasis added.

[24] Lacoste, 1984, p. 100.

of forming, or capturing a state.[25] So what distinguishes a group with a high level of ʻasabiyya, from one without it? First of all Ibn Khaldun's concept of *umran badawi* is important. This translates as 'life in the desert' or 'nomadic life.' According to Lacoste, however, when Ibn Khaldun refers to *umran badawi,* "he is referring to the life of the rural population as a whole, and [...] not to nomadism alone." The opposite of *umran badawi* for Ibn Khaldun is the *umran hadari*, or life of towns or 'sedentary life.'[26] It is a basic premise of Ibn Khaldun's philosophy that those who constitute the *umran badawi* are more likely to retain a higher level of ʻasabiyya through which [groups] gain the strength to "found a state." It is the realization of this goal, however, that causes the tribe to begin transforming to *umran hadari* and therefore, to experience a decline in ʻasabiyya.[27]

Leadership is a critical factor in the activation of ʻasabiyya. According to Ibn Khaldun there is a distinction between a tribe where the leader only has moral authority and a tribe where a leader has established his dominance, the latter being a tribe capable of ʻasabiyya. Yet, Khaldunian theory follows that "only tribes that have developed ʻasabiyya constitute a political force capable of making their chieftains heads of states."[28] It seems, therefore, that mobilisation of latent ʻasabiyya requires the simultaneous presence of the correct conditions in a group as well as strong and dominant leadership. Once a leader has established his superiority within his group his natural inclination is to exert his newfound power for political and military gains. As Ibn Khaldun put it,

> When a person sharing in the group feeling has reached the rank of chieftain and commands obedience, and when he finds the way open toward superiority and

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid, p. 93.

[27] Ibid, p. 100.

[28] Ibid, p. 106.

> the use of force, he follows that way, because it is something desirable [...] Thus, royal authority is a goal to which group feeling leads.[29]

As will be shown, the rise of Hafiz al-Asad demonstrated this type of political dynamic whereby, having established his influence in the Alawite community, he found the way 'open toward superiority' and the establishment of a type of "royal authority."

How a Dynasty Maintains 'Asabiyya

The tribes of North Africa in Ibn Khaldun's time were largely egalitarian in structure and military capability. The pastoral nature of tribal economies meant that all tribesmen were generally horsemen and carried arms. Thus, there was no monopoly of military force by the leadership of the tribe; Lacoste called this a 'military democracy.'[30] Good examples of this type of social structure were the mountain Berber tribes of North Africa, who in many ways resembled the Alawites in terms of their "refractory and rebellious" nature.[31] Under these conditions the tribal leadership remained very much a part of the tribe during the early stages of 'asabiyya. 'Blood ties' were then activated by the tribal leadership to mobilize the group to achieve military victories. The resultant political and material power that military victory brings, however, serves to gradually degrade the original 'asabiyya of the tribe as a "ruling class" develops.[32] Moreover, the urbanization of the group with the accompanying 'luxuries' and comforts serves to reduce the groups 'asabiyya. A gradual transformation occurs whereby 'blood ties' are replaced by "vassal relations."[33] Paradoxically, however, 'blood' relations assume greater importance in nominal terms as the 'ruling class' seeks to

---

[29] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 108.

[30] Lacoste, 1984, p. 30-31.

[31] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 131; Ibn Khaldun was speaking only of the Berbers. The comparison is the authors.

[32] Lacoste, 1984, pp. 30-31.

[33] Ibid. pp. 106-107.

"demagogically stress their importance" as a means to retain the tribe's loyalty and therefore, [its] power.[34]

As a means to maintain solidarity the ruling class draws the group into conflict to "foster a feeling of unity in the face of an illusory common danger."[35] The threat posed by external (or internal) enemies rallies a group around a dynasty and helps uphold their 'asabiyya. Another factor Ibn Khaldun mentions regarding the maintenance of dynasties is the ability to control "religious propaganda." This gives a dynasty, at its beginning, another power in addition to the group feeling of its supporters.[36] Ibn Khaldun was mainly referring to a dynasty's ability to portray itself as promoting the mission of Islam.[37] In the modern context 'religious propaganda' could also be interpreted as political ideology. A leader who presents a populist ideology, while also retaining leadership over a group with high 'asabiyya, will be in good position to establish his rule and maintain 'asabiyya. In this vein the socialist-Ba'athist ideology of the Asad regime, especially under Hafiz al-Asad, provided the regime with legitimacy and assisted in the maintenance of Alawite 'asabiyya.

Variables for the Success of a Dynasty

There are two important variables contained within Ibn Khaldun's theory which weigh on the strength and longevity of a dynasty. The first variable that Ibn Khaldun suggests is, "The greatness of a dynasty, the extent of its territory, and the length of its duration depend upon the numerical strength of its supporters."[38] Thus, a dynasty with a proportionately small group of supporters can only expect to achieve moderate territorial expansion and a relatively short period in power. Strategic analyst James Quinlivin calculates that a minimum ratio of 20 loyalists to

[34] Ibid. pp. 107-108.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 126.

[37] Ibid. pp. 126-127.

[38] Ibid. p. 129.

every 1000 persons is required in order to maintain control in an authoritarian state where the majority is potentially hostile.[39] According to this reckoning, if the (able bodied) adult male component of a dynasty's supporting group is close to or less than this ratio the importance of maintaining the groups 'asabiyya in totality becomes critical.

The other variable provided by Khaldun is that, "A dynasty rarely establishes itself firmly in lands with many different tribes and groups."[40] According to this variable a dynasty which tries to assert dominance over a diverse state faces a challenge in terms of consolidating and maintaining its rule. In a state with a plurality of political interests and identities a ruler must be highly adept in the art of statecraft, not only to maintain the 'asabiyya of their own group, but also to balance the interests of potential enemies. If these two variables were to be combined, moreover, and a dynasty had a relatively small supporting group and ruled a diverse state, according to a Khaldunian perspective, the prospects for that dynasty would be bleak. For this study, therefore, the Alawite proportion of 12-15 percent of the Syrian population, while not insignificant, is small enough that the Asad regime cannot afford any serious deterioration of Alawite 'asabiyya.

In addition, Syria is one of the most diverse states in the Middle East with multiple cross-cutting sectarian and ethnic identities. For instance, Kurdish-Arab, Muslim-Christian, and Sunni-Shi'a cleavages as well as strong tribal loyalties exist within the Syrian state. While the diversity of the Syrian state posed a challenge to the consolidation of Asad rule, as this study shows, the politics of sectarian insecurity among different communities also provided an asset to the regime, which could play on insecurities to subvert liberal opposition and reinforce the 'asabiyya of the Alawite community.

---

[39] James T. Quinlivan, 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,' *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 136-137.

[40] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, p. 130.

How a Group's 'Asabiyya Declines

Ibn Khaldun's concept of 'asabiyya contains the ingredients for the political empowerment of a tribal group, but also the seeds of its demise. As political scientist Lucian Ashworth explains, "Ibn Khaldun [...] argued that group feeling within the dynasty led to the early success of royal authority, but [...] this same group feeling naturally decayed in succeeding generations."[41] This process results in more vigorous groups that retain greater quantities of 'asabiyya, deposing 'senile' dynasties. In this way Ibn Khaldun partially explained the political instability of the Maghreb in the fourteenth century. A reflection on Ibn Khaldun's cyclical view of history explains his acceptance of this volatile political condition.[42] Thus the dialectical nature of 'asabiyya becomes apparent, what begins as the motor of the state is, according to Yves Lacoste, "destroyed by the emergence of the 'state.'"[43]

> This new wealth destroys tribal solidarity. As more and more of the profits are appropriated and as inequality between members of the tribe increases [...] it becomes obvious that the ruler and his entourage are the main beneficiaries of the tribe's victories. Increasingly ties of kinship begin to look like a pretence. Profits are distributed amongst relatively few people and this allows the privileged few to surround themselves with more and more clients. The importance of blood ties declines accordingly.[44]

This leads to the paradox described previously concerning the increasing emphasis placed upon 'blood ties' by a ruling class, as those 'blood ties' are actually in decline. As the ruling class appropriates more power and greater

---

[41] Lucian Ashworth, "Ibn Khaldun and the Origins of State Politics," in Persram, N. (ed.) *Postcolonialism and Political Theory*, (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 47.

[42] Ibid. p. 44.

[43] Lacoste, 1984, p. 116.

[44] Ibid. pp. 113-114.

wealth, its need of loyal vassals to ensure its position gains importance, thus 'blood ties' are emphasised to reinforce loyalty.

There are four symptoms, given by Ibn Khaldun, which indicate a dynasty is in decline. The first is when the "ruler seeks the help of clients and followers" outside of his group.[45] Such help could come in the form of external allies or mercenaries. This indicates that the ruler has lost touch with his group, or that he seeks to push them away from his power. The second sign of decline is when a ruler, who has inherited power, is not well equipped in the art of statecraft. In this scenario, according to Ibn Khaldun, it may be that "control over the ruler (by others) may occur in dynasties."[46] Depending on who wields influence over the ruler, and what their particular interests are, a situation may occur that sees the ruler taking steps that go against the interests of his group, in which case a decline of 'asabiyya occurs.

Another symptom of a dynasty in decline, in Ibn Khaldun's view, is the emergence of "exaggerated harshness" by the dynasty.[47] If the dynasty must resort to brutality to maintain its authority it signals that the dynasty has lost its moral authority and is entering the stage of "senility," which, once commenced, is irreversible.[48] A further element in Ibn Khaldun's theory on the rise and decline of dynasties is his assertion that "commercial activity on the part of the ruler is harmful to his subjects and ruinous to the tax revenue."[49] By this Khaldun refers to a dynasty engaging in private enterprise in competition with, and to the detriment of its subjects. In a modern context this could be interpreted as a government corruptly intervening in economic affairs by exploiting its political power to gain financial advantages. Both these factors of harshness and corruption could entail a

---

[45] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, p. 146.

[46] Ibid. p. 149.

[47] Ibid. p. 152.

[48] Ibid. p. 245.

[49] Ibid. p. 232.

decline of ‘asabiyya in the dynasty’s group, who may view negatively the brutality and corruption of the dynasty. In addition, the supporting group begins to feel disenfranchised as the dynasty becomes increasingly wealthy and ostentatious in contrast to the egalitarianism that existed among the group at the outset of the dynasty.

The ‘inevitable’ collapse of a dynasty occurs at its two main foundations: its economic power and the ‘asabiyya of its group. At this point, Khaldun says, the dynasty is lost and cannot be restored.[50] Ibn Khaldun makes one more interesting comment that could prove prophetic in this study, he says, “there is overpopulation at the end of dynasties, and pestilences and famines frequently occur.”[51] In this study, the economic pillars of the Asad dynasty could well collapse, but whether the sectarian ‘asabiyya of the Alawite will also collapse, remains to be seen. Alawite ‘asabiyya, upheld by sectarian insecurity, may prove more resilient than Ibn Khaldun’s tribal or social ‘asabiyya.

In Ibn Khaldun’s cyclical view of history, new dynasties rose up to replace ‘senile’ ones and immediately began to decay, analogous to the “human life cycle.”[52] In the modern context it may be that senile dynasties will not be replaced by new dynasties but with pluralist forms of government. Ibn Khaldun did not envisage any other form of government than authoritarian rule by dynasties. Hence, while he can help us explain the rise and fall of dynasties, he may not be able to assist in predicting what comes after their demise. It cannot be assumed, however, that new dynasties will not emerge in the Middle East. Indeed, in the 1940s and 1950s there was a general expectation in many newly independent Middle East republics, such as Syria, Iraq and Egypt, that authoritarian dynastic rule was consigned to history, yet modern history proved otherwise. So for the

---

[50] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*. p. 246.

[51] Ibid. p. 255.

[52] Ashworth, 2007, p. 44.

states of the Middle East it may be a question of whether Khaldunian politics will persist or not.

The Security Dilemma and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity

While the results of the political upheavals of 2011-2012 in the Middle East are far from clear, it seems that the politics of sectarian insecurity will play a major part in which states may escape the cycle of Khaldunian dynastic politics. As already discussed, Syria and Bahrain are proving particularly resistant to mass popular movements calling for political change, whereas the more religiously homogenous states like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, cautiously proceed towards genuine representative politics. [53]

The last comparable geopolitical transformation of a similar scale to the 'Arab Spring' followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The ensuing struggles between newly autonomous national groups led to new interpretations of international relations theory focusing on the 'security dilemma' of ethno-religious groups. Are there similarities between Khaldunian theory, the 'politics of sectarian insecurity' and ethno-religious security dilemma theory? In his influential 1993 essay, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,' Barry Posen wrote,

> When humans can readily cooperate, the whole exceeds the sum of the parts, creating a unit stronger relative to those groups with a weaker identity. Thus, the "groupness" of the ethnic, religious, cultural collectivities that emerge from collapsed empires gives each of them an inherent offensive military power.[54]

Posen's assessment of the characteristics of sub-state groups appears very similar to Ibn Khaldun's definition of a group with high 'asabiyya. The stronger the

---

[53] Egypt does, however, have a significant Coptic Christian minority of around ten percent.

[54] Barry Posen, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,' in M. Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), p. 106.

collective identity of a group the more likely it will have 'offensive potential' to achieve victories and impose dominance over other groups with weaker identity. This creates a security dilemma as groups perceive mutual threat in one another other and therefore mobilise, politically and militarily, as a group and consequently, conflict ensues.[55] There is similarity in this regard with the politics of sectarian insecurity. A lack of security causes groups to mobilise out of mistrust of other groups' intentions, even if the opposing parties are actually striving to achieve political integration, which is what occurred in Syria in the 1960s.

There is another interesting case to be made in relation to the security dilemma literature. Erik Melander notes a curious feature of ethnically mixed regions whereby: "ethnic diversity reduces the likelihood of conflict arising in the first place, but increases the risk of massive violence if conflict nevertheless does arise." [56] This type of dualism can be informed by the politics of sectarian insecurity. First, opposing groups often understand the potential chaos that can ensue from conflict, which creates strong disincentives to resort to conflict. This has arguably been a prevailing view in multi-communal Lebanon, especially since the sectarian chaos of 1975-1990.[57] Alternately, ethno-religious diversity can be exploited to consolidate authoritarian rule. Regimes can actively espouse the threat of ethno-religious chaos while propagandising their 'stabilising' role. Moreover, if the regime's position is challenged it is easy for it to spark conflict between communities in order to reinforce the regime's message that they are necessary to peaceful communal coexistence. This is a major theme of the political history of the Alawites and Syria that will be examined in some detail in the following chapters.

---

[55] For a graphic showing this process see, Shiping Tang, 'The security dilemma and ethnic conflict: toward a dynamic and integrative theory of ethnic conflict,' *Review of International Studies*, Vo. 37 (2011), p. 515, Fig. 1.

[56] Erik Melander, 'The Geography of Fear: Regional Ethnic Diversity, the Security Dilemma and Ethnic War,' *European Journal of International Relations* (2009), Vol. 15, No. 95, p. 118.

[57] See, William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, draft manuscript (New York: Oxford University Press), forthcoming in 2012.

In sum, ethno-religious applications of 'security dilemma theory' offer relevant ideas about the security concerns of groups based around threat perception and the pursuit of security relative to one another.[58] There is, however, an important difference between 'security dilemma' approaches and the 'politics of sectarian insecurity.' The former approach generally explains causes of conflict between groups *after* the collapse of diverse empires or states, such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia or the Ottoman Empire. The approach taken in this study combines Ibn Khaldun's ideas about group identity and state formation, with conceptions of sectarian insecurity. This method offers a way to understand the whole political history of a group. After examining how a group's 'asabiyya or "groupness" develops,[59] Ibn Khaldun can tell us how this 'asabiyya can be mobilised politically by a member of the group who has established his "superiority" in the group. This in turn opens the way to the establishment of political power approximate to "royal authority."[60] Then, by adjusting Ibn Khaldun's theory to take account of the 'politics of sectarian insecurity,' explanations can be found for the resilience of sectarian 'asabiyya

[58] Posen, 1993, pp. 105-107.

[59] Ibid. p. 106.

[60] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 108.

Chapter Three

How the Alawites Developed High Levels of 'Asabiyya, 850–1832

This chapter examines the origins and course of Alawite history and highlights the factors that caused the community to develop high levels of sectarian 'asabiyya. Alawite history contains many episodes of severe persecution, normally by Sunni political and religious authorities, which hardened the community's particularism, self reliance and insecurity. There were also periods, including the Hamdanid and Crusader periods, when the community enjoyed reasonable security and integration with wider society. These periods never lasted however, and always gave way to renewed persecution and discrimination. The development of high levels of sectarian 'asabiyya may ultimately prove the end product of how a community is treated by hegemonic powers and 'mainstream' society.

Another process examined in this chapter is how the Alawites came to fulfil Ibn Khaldun's requirement that a group be *Umran Badawi* (rural/nomadic) in order to possess high levels of 'asabiyya. During the thousand year period covered in this chapter, from ninth century Abbasid Iraq to the start of Ottoman decline in Syria from the 1830s, the Alawites changed from an urban based religious sect in Iraq to an isolated tribal society in the mountains of north-western Syria. Other factors in the Alawite political evolution were their transformation from a diffuse minority to a compact minority,[1] limited economic opportunities caused by the inhospitable physical environment in their mountain refuge, and

[1] Diffuse minorities have no core territory and are distributed among a majority. Compact minorities have a core territory where they are a majority within a larger polity. See: Gabriel Ben-Dor, 'Minorities in the Middle East: Theory and Practice,' in *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, eds. O. Bengio and G. Ben-Dor (Boulder: Lynne Riener, 1999), pp. 1-20.

social factors such as legal and religious discrimination. Figure 4 summarises the course of Alawite history and specifies key individuals and events. Between 850CE[2] and 1070, the Alawites developed into a unique branch of Shi'a Islam and were present in the main cities of Iraq and, from the tenth century, Syria. During this period the religious doctrines of the Alawites were formulated by the central figures of Alawite tradition, Muhammad ibn Nusayr, Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasībī, and Abu Qasim al-Tabarani. The followers of these individuals were largely drawn from the middle class, and included theologians, and intellectuals from the urban areas of the Middle East.

The broad political context of the early period was chaotic. The Abbasid Caliphate was struggling to maintain its authority,[3] Islam was fragmenting into distinct sects with political overtones, and the Caliphate was under pressure from a resurgent Byzantium in the north. In this environment the Alawites received political support from influential Shi'a benefactors, firstly in Iraq and then in Syria. The resurgence of Sunni orthodox power, with the arrival of the Sunni Seljuk Turks toward the end of the eleventh century, left the Alawites without political support in the interior of the Levant and they were forced to relocate. The community found refuge in the 'no-man's land' that existed until the 1080s, between Byzantine forces on the Levantine coast and the Sunni Seljuk forces in the interior.

The process of relocation, which saw the sect transform from an urban, intellectual community to a rural, tribally structured peasantry with little political relevance or support, was largely complete by the end of the eleventh century. Thereafter the Alawites, after merging with existing rural populations, were limited to the mountainous region of north western Syria. The geopolitical division of the Levant with the arrival of the Crusaders allowed the Alawites the

---

[2] All dates given hereafter are according to the Gregorian calendar.

[3] David Waines, 'The Third Century Internal Crisis of the Abbasids, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol.20, No.3, October 1977, pp. 282-306.

chance to consolidate in their new territory. This 'breathing space' helped them to survive when Sunni hegemony resumed over the Levant after the Crusader withdrawal in the late thirteenth century.

For seven centuries the Alawites merely survived, developing a unique social and religious identity in their inhospitable mountain refuge. The Alawites remained marginalised and oppressed until Sunni imperial rule in the Levant finally began to wane in the nineteenth century. Ironically, it was perhaps their downtrodden state and political irrelevance that was a major reason for their survival.[4] It was however, their complete transformation to a rural compact minority and persistent persecution that led to their development of high levels of sectarian 'asabiyya.

The Establishment of the Alawite/Nusayri Sect 850-926

Early Alawite history is difficult to portray accurately as it is necessary to distinguish factual, mythical and misleading accounts of events. Most of the credible work on the early history of the Alawites has focused on theology,[5] and pays little attention to the political characteristics of the early community. This section focuses on the political aspects of early Alawite history.

It is generally accepted that the history of the Alawites began with the career of the eponym of the sect, Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, (d.883 or 873) in Iraq in the middle of the ninth century.[6] Ibn Nusayr's activities can be viewed as a part of the Iraqi *Ghulat* (literally exaggerators) movement that began in eighth century Kufa in Iraq.[7] At its most basic level the Ghulat represented a movement that

[4] Xavier De Planhol, *Minoritès en Islam, Gèographie Politique et Sociale* (France: Flammarion, 1997), p. 84.

[5] Friedman, 2010, pp. 6-7.

[6] Kais M.Firro, 'The 'Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nusayrīya to Islam via 'Alawīya,' *Der Islam*, Vol. 82, no. 1, Walter de Gruyter, 2005, p.1; Matti Moosa, 1988, p.259; Bar-Asher Meir, M. & Kofsky, Aryeh, 'Dogma and Ritual in Kitab al-Ma'Aref by the Nusayri Theologian Abu Said Maymun b. Al-Qasim al-Tabarani (d.426/1034-35),' *Arabica*, tome LII, 1, 2005, p. 54.

[7] Friedman, 2010, p. 6.

deified the fourth Imam ʻAli ibn Abi Talib and his descendents.[8] This movement is considered extreme by the Shi'a and heretical by orthodox Sunnis.

The Ghulat movement occurred within the context of the political fragmentation of Islam in the seventh century. The Prophet Muhammad had, after all, predicted that his community would splinter into seventy-two (or seventy-three) sects.[9] The main branch of Islam that the Ghulat extended from was the Shi'a, or partisans of ʻAli, who began crystallizing into a distinct religio-political movement from the time of the Caliph Uthman around 644.[10] The separation between the two main branches of Islam, the Shi'a and the Sunnis, was mostly a political separation based on a disagreement over how the leaders of the Muslim community should be chosen. The Shi'a believed that the leader should come from the family of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*), whereas the Sunnis believed in the appointment of a 'rightly guided' successor (*Caliph*). The Ghulat however, took this separation to another level with their proclamation of the divinity of Prophet Muhammad's first cousin and son-in-law, ʻAli ibn Abi Talib. The individual attributed with instigating this movement is Ibn Saʻba, a Jewish Yemeni convert to Islam who during the caliphate of ʻAli ibn Abu Talib (656-661) publicly declared ʻAli as 'divine.'[11]

The Ghulat interpretation of Islam would have been unacceptable to the political and religious authorities of this time as it challenged the authority of the temporal caliphate. Moreover, as there was no explicit suggestion in the Quran or Hadith about representations of divinity on earth, the Ghulat were, when exposed, persecuted as heretics. Berkey and Friedman suggest that the Ghulat were not considered completely radical in their early years, and they were representative of the syncretism of the new ideas of Islam with established

[8] Ibid.

[9] J.P. Berkey, *The Formation Of Islam, Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press), 2003, p. 83.

[10] Moosa, 1988, p. XV.

[11] Berkey, 2003, p. 95.

traditions and were relatively well tolerated.[12] It is important, however, not to underestimate the political effectiveness of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), which shielded the Ghulat groups from full exposure by the authorities. Certainly from the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate (750CE) the Ghulat were forced to begin practicing taqiyya and kept their beliefs secret in order to avoid persecution.[13] This tradition of taqiyya meant that the Ghulat were virtually invisible politically, and they did not play much part in the politics of the Islamic world in the eighth and ninth centuries. It was in this political context that the origins of the Alawites can be located as a new branch of the Ghulat, an already marginal and repressed group.

Muhammad ibn Nusayr was a charismatic theologian and mystical figure in the mid-ninth century. He was a member of the Shi'ite Banū Numayr tribe, settled near the Euphrates in Iraq and allied to the Banū Taghlib tribe, who would form the core of the Hamdanid dynasty of Aleppo in the tenth century.[14] Ibn Nusayr rose to prominence when he declared himself the *Bab* (door) to the divinity of the Shi'a Imams around 850. Alawite adherence to Ibn Nusayr's claim were confirmed to this writer by Alawite Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak who said, "Muhammad Ibn Nusayr is in Alawite belief, the *Bab* (door) and helper of the eleventh Imam of *Ahl al-Bayt*, Al-Hasan al-'Askarī [...]"[15]

It was a combination of Nusayr's colourful personality and his tribal affiliations that gained him a following in Iraq in the mid ninth century. To his supporters he was "a charismatic leader with supernatural powers." [16] It was also likely Nusayr's personal qualities that allowed him to achieve close contacts with

---

[12] Ibid. p. 89; Friedman, 2010, p. 223.

[13] Ibid. p. 133.

[14] Friedman. 2010, pp. 6-7; this political association became important for the Alawites when its leadership shifted to Syria in the tenth century.

[15] Shaykh Nasīr Eskiocak, interview with the author.

[16] Friedman, 2010, pp. 6-7.

the tenth and eleventh Shi'a Imams, 'Ali al-Hādī (d.868) and Hasan al-'Askarī (d.873).[17]

An Alawite tradition regarding Nusayr's relations with the eleventh Imam al-'Askarī gives an insight into his purported association with the Shi'a Imams and also the mystique that Ibn Nusayr cultivated:

> A delegation of Persian Horsemen paid a visit to Hasan al-'Askarī, they found him dressed all in green, surrounded by green mats and pillows, and next to him Ibn Nusayr, also clad in green … the Imam then ordered them to present their requests and to set forth what they had with them. Each took out a dinar and offered it to the Imam. The Imam then directed Ibn Nusayr to sign the coins and return them to their owners … And behold, on one side of each coin was written : "There is no God but Hasan al-'Askarī, his *ism* [name] Muhammad and his *bab* [door] Abu Shu'ayb Muhammad b. Nusayr b. Bakri al-Numayri, whoever says otherwise is lying."[18]

This narrative places early Alawite tradition alongside the key figures of Shi'a Islam. It also signals their views regarding the divinity of the descendents of 'Ali and that the *Bab,* Ibn Nusayr, was the gateway to this divinity.

It is unclear exactly what influence Nusayr exerted over the Shi'a Imams, but, given that the Imams were given only limited symbolic religious and political authority by the Abbasids, any influence could only have minimal effect. For example, a meeting is supposed to have occurred between Ibn Nusayr and the Imam al-Hādī around 850, which concerned trying to prevent the excavation of the sacred site of Imam Husayn at Karbala by the Abbasids.[19] The subsequent destruction of the site by the Caliph al-Mutawakkil,[20] despite the Imams efforts,

---

[17] Ibid.

[18] Bar-Asher and Kofsky, 2005, p. 54.

[19] Friedman, 2010, p. 9.

[20] Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*: Supplement, Vol.12, (Leiden: Brill, 1980), p. 94.

illustrates Ibn Nusayr and al-Hādī's political impotence. It seems that Nusayr's links with the Shi'a Imams lent him only rhetorical opportunities. Nonetheless, he exploited these opportunities to create a mystical image of himself that he used to attract a following.

The community that built up around Ibn Nusayr numbered ten direct disciples. Friedman points out however, that these were most likely the leaders of a larger community that was based within the tribal group the Banū Numayr and it was this association that provides explanation for the sect's survival within a hostile environment.[21] The basis of the Banū Numayr's support of Nusayr and his followers is uncertain. It may have been based on empathy for his religious revelations. It is more likely however, that it was based more on tribal solidarity, or 'asabiyya. The fact that the Banū Numayr's close allies the Banū Taghlib (later the Hamdanids) retained a strict adherence to orthodox Imami Shi'ism would support this conclusion.

The very first manifestation of the modern Alawites was contained within this marginal and minute community. It was arguably brought into existence by the sheer fact of Ibn Nusayr's personality; its survival was ensured by the support of Nusayr's powerful tribal links and by an association with the last living Shi'a Imams. Ibn Nusayr was however, a controversial figure and made enemies among both the Shi'a and Sunni religious establishments. He was subsequently discredited and 'cursed' by some of the Shi'ite leadership for his claim to mystical links with the Imams and was accused of "immoral behaviour," which led to his condemnation and exclusion from the Shi'a community.[22] In Alawite belief, the discrediting of Ibn Nusayr deprived him of his rightful place in the Shi'a religious tradition. According to the Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, "There was a group of people who attacked the Lord Muhammad ibn Nusayr. They attacked him to lower him

---

[21] Friedman, 2010, p. 11.

[22] Friedman, 2010, p.8; Friedman used the term excommunication to describe Ibn Nusayr's punishment, which is normally associated with Christianity.

and to lower the future that was reserved for him. They accused him [...] without any foundation – lies."[23] To the Alawites, therefore, this 'treachery' was the first example of their community's mistreatment and marginalization in politics and religion. In Alawite thinking, the deprivation of Ibn Nusayr of his rightful status, as the *Bab* to the holy Imams, was the first act in the long history of Alawites being denied their rightful status as 'true believers.'

While Ibn Nusayr played a key role in the creation of the new sect it seems that following his death (873 or 883CE),[24] the group struggled to gain ground. The two leaders that followed Ibn Nusayr, Ibn Jundab and then Abdallah al-Jannan kept the group alive but did not to make any clear advances.[25] It was not until the emergence of Abū 'Abdallah al-Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasībī from Junbula in southern Iraq,[26] as the leader of the sect around 926[27] that the group began to flourish and to develop a distinct identity.[28] According to Alawite tradition: "al-Khasībī [was] a leader of the Hamadiyeen from the tribe Banu Hamdan [...] he was a man who had religious knowledge from the side of Al-Mazhab al-Imami."[29] Al-Khasibi, like Ibn Nusayr, had influential tribal connections that helped him in his endeavours to advance his religious mission.

In the early tenth century the tenuous political situation for Ghulat groups like the Alawites in Abbasid Iraq continued. Al-Khasībī was imprisoned at some stage between 926-945CE, and apparently escaped, and fled to Syria.[30] There is an often repeated story of how an emanation of Jesus came to al-Khasībī while in

[23] Shaykh Nasīr Eskiocak, interview with the author, Antakya, Turkey, March 29, 2011.

[24] Firro, 2005, p. 1; Moosa 1988, p. 259.

[25] Friedman, 2010, p. 16.

[26] Ibid. p. 17.

[27] Ibid. pp. 19-20.

[28] Ibid. p.17; Bar-Asher and Kofsky, 2005, p. 57.

[29] Shaykh Nasīr Eskiocak, interview with the author.

[30] Friedman, 2010, pp.22-23.

prison and that this was his reason for migrating to Syria rather than Persia.[31] The reality was that he would find political support there in the form of his tribal kinsmen who had established the Hamdanid Dynasty at Aleppo, which extended as far as Latakia on the Syrian coast.[32]

There is little information regarding the Iraqi branch of the Alawites after the mid-tenth century, although they possibly retained a centre up to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258.[33] From the time of al-Khasībī's migration, however, Syria was the centre of gravity for the Alawites.

The Alawites gradual reduction to the Jabal Sahiliyah took place over the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries. This relocation marked the first stage in the political transformation of the Alawites. In Abbasid Iraq they were a small marginal group attached to the Shi'a branch of Islam, and influenced by Persian cultural activity.[34] With the group's relocation to Syria they moved out of this sphere and into a region with a large Christian population and a fractured geopolitical environment shaped by the Muslim-Byzantine struggle.[35] Syria constituted a very different environment for the Alawites. In this fractured geopolitical and physical landscape there would be opportunities for the Alawites to manoeuvre between competing powers and, when necessary, find refuge in the rugged topography of the coastal Levant. It was however a step towards isolation on the social and geographic periphery of the Muslim world and the development of Alawite sectarian particularism.

To sum up the Iraqi period, in the second half of the ninth and early part of the tenth centuries the Alawites emerged during a period of political and religious

---

[31] For example see Moosa,1988, p. 265.

[32] Shaykh Nasīr Eskiocak, interview with the author.

[33] Friedman, 2010, p. 35.

[34] Meir Michael Bar-Asher, 'The Iranian Component of the Nusayrī Religion,' *Iran*, Vol. 4, (2003), p. 222.

[35] Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 105; Ibid. p. 223.

ferment as the Abbasid Caliphate fought to re-consolidate its power.[36] The Shi'a branch of Islam, which had crystallised politically, became increasingly marginalised, culminating with the demise/occultation of the line of Imams in 873CE. The position of the Ghulat Shi'a, such as the Alawites, was the most marginal, and they were forced to relocate to the periphery in Syria. The harsh treatment the Alawite leaders received at the hands of the Sunni authorities in Iraq, (such as al-Khasībī's imprisonment) provide the first glimpse of the general pattern of Alawite setbacks and repression whenever faced with Sunni political power.

From Umran Hadari to Umran Badawi 926-1070

Al-Khasībī departed from Baghdad sometime between 926 and 945. This was the first step in the sect's transformation from an urban diffuse minority to a rural compact minority, which is a key requirement of Ibn Khaldun's theory for high levels of 'asabiyya. Alawite migration was mostly propelled by Sunni persecution, which in turn added to Alawite insecurity and hostility toward Sunni religious and political authorities. By the start of the eleventh century enmity toward Sunni Islam would become an official part of Alawite religious discourse.[37] Initially however, the community experienced a period of relative security and social integration in Syria, where political power was split between the Shi'ite Hamdanids and the Christian Byzantines.

The first community established by al-Khasībī in Syria was at Harran, a city in northern Syria, now Turkey, populated by philosophers, astronomers and the Sabean sect.[38] Many of the pagan aspects of Alawite tradition have been attributed to the interaction with this city.[39] Politically, this city was peripheral and was more

---

[36] William Harris, *The Levant, A Fractured Mosaic* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2003), p. 54.

[37] Bar-Asher and Kofsky, 2005, p. 62.

[38] Friedman, 2010, p.23, n. 72.

[39] Moosa, 1988, p. 134.

or less a last lingering remnant of antiquity in a reclusive corner of the Medieval Middle East.

It was al-Khasībī's arrival in Aleppo at the Hamdanid court of Sayf al-Dawla that more significantly marked the group's arrival in Syria. In order to ingratiate himself with the Shi'ite Hamdanids, al-Khasībī emphasised his orthodox Imami credentials, essentially exercising a politically pragmatic taqiyya. In order to achieve political support, al-Khasibi effectively had to maintain two distinct identities, that of Imami scholar and that of leader of the Alawite sect.[40] The suggestion that there was a major religious differentiation between Sayf al-Dawla and the group led by al-Khasibi is not accepted by Alawites, however. According to Shaykh Eskiocak, al-Khasibi was the leader of one 'school' of Shi'a Islam, in the same way as there are Maliki, Hanbali, Hanafi and Shafi'i schools in Sunni Islam.[41] In any case, the period of Hamdanid rule in Aleppo (945-1005)[42] coincides with the first real Alawite consolidation in what was a golden period for the community.

The Alawite association with the Hamdanids, and in particular with the emir Sayf al-Dawla, was the group's first contact with political power in Syria. The political support of the Hamdanids was essentially an extension of the tribal support that the Alawites received from the Banū Numayr and their allies the Banū Taghlib (now the Hamdanids) in Iraq. There is no evidence to suggest that the Hamdanids empathised with, or endorsed the particular religious doctrines of the Alawites.[43] The relationship was reliant on the maintenance of a taqiyya presenting an image of the Alawites as an orthodox Imami Shi'a group and al-Khasībī's sound Imami credentials. The Alawites at this time basically fell under

[40] Friedman, 2010, p. 33.

[41] Shaykh Nasīr Eskiocak, interview with the author.

[42] Harris, 2003, p. 197.

[43] After the 960s, the Hamdanids essentially ruled as a tributary buffer state for the benefit of the Byzantine Empire and were probably not in a position to effectively impose religious policy across Northern Syria anyway.

the umbrella of the tribal ʻasabiyya of the Hamdanids. Overall, while only really a small urban religious movement, the group was well tolerated and operated freely. These conditions meant that there was little impetus for the development of a separate sectarian ʻasabiyya along Khaldunian lines.

Hamdanid support provided a window for al-Khasibi to advance the sect. He was apparently a prolific writer and it was during his time in Aleppo that he canonised the Alawite religious doctrines that were proliferated across Northern Syria.[44] By the time of al-Khasībī's death (969) the sect had branches in Aleppo, Harran, Beirut, Tiberius, and Tripoli.[45]

The Hamdanid dynasty began to suffer setbacks in 962, firstly when Aleppo was sacked by the Byzantines who temporarily forced Sayf al-Dawla out of the city.[46] Shortly afterwards in 969CE, both Sayf al-Dawla and al-Khasibi died.[47] This constituted a double blow to the Alawites and the sect's position began to slowly deteriorate. The effect of the Byzantine resurgence on Alawite activities in Syria is not entirely clear. It is likely that the community would have been of little consequence to the Byzantines who turned northern Syria into a tributary buffer state.[48] The lack of a strong Muslim state in northern Syria after the 960s was however not completely negative for the Alawites who spent this period consolidating the body of literature compiled by al-Khasibi.[49]

It is illustrative that the resumption of strong Muslim authority in Aleppo proved detrimental for the Alawites. Their activities were, according to Friedman,

[44] Friedman, 2010, p. 33; Yaron Friedman, al-Husayn Ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi: A Historical Biography of the Nusayrî-Alawite Sect, *Studia Islamica*, (2001) No. 93; This was confirmed in interviews with the Shaykhs ʻAli Yeral and Nasīr Eskiocak.

[45] De Planhol, 2007, p.85; Friedman, 2010, pp.38-39; Stefan Winter, *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule*, 1516-1788 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 61.

[46] Harris, 2003, p. 60.

[47] Friedman, 2010, p.36 and p. 33.

[48] Harris, 2003, p. 60.

[49] Friedman, 2010, p. 34.

strongly curtailed when the Imami Mirdasids came to power in Aleppo in 1025[50] (or 1023).[51] The Alawites are reported to have 'cursed' the Mirdasids, which suggests that the new dynasty actively repressed Alawites.[52] From this point on the sect ceased to have political support in the interior of the Levant.

Abu Sa'id Maymun b. Qasim al-Tabarani, as his name suggests, came from Tiberius in the late tenth century.[53] Al-Tabarani's importance lay in his standardisation of the rituals necessary for a working religion for general consumption.[54] In addition it was most likely he who pioneered the Alawite migration into the Jabal Sahiliyah (literally coastal mountains), a move which, most likely saved the sect from destruction. Having moved to Aleppo at the age of eighteen, al-Tabarani is reported to have left again due to the turbulence of that city.[55] Exactly where al-Tabarani first migrated is uncertain, for a long time it was generally agreed that he migrated from Aleppo to Latakia on the Mediterranean coast.[56] He can be placed in Tripoli around 1007-1008[57] and it seems he moved into the rural mountainous areas inland and south of Latakia (but *not* to the town itself) sometime between this time and his death in 1034-35.[58] Al-Tabarani's reasons for heading north into the far less favourable mountains of northern Syria were most likely twofold: one, the mountains behind Beirut, Tripoli and Tiberius were already well populated. The second possible reason was the support the sect retained from a local Shi'a family the Banū Muhriz who owned a fortress, the

---

[50] Ibid. p. 41.

[51] Harris, 2003, p. 64.

[52] Friedman, 2010, p.41.

[53] Bar-Asher and Kofsky, 2005, p. 43; Friedman, 2010, p. 41.

[54] Ibid. pp. 43-65; Friedman, 2010, p. 40.

[55] Kais, M. Firro, 'The 'Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nusayrīya to Islam via 'Alawīya,' *Der Islam*, Vol.82, no.1, pp 1-31, Walter de Gruyter, 2005, p. 3.

[56] See for example, Harris, 2003, p. 65 and Kais Firro, 2005, p. 3

[57] Bar Asher and Kofsky, 2005, p. 45; Tripoli at this time was ruled at this time by the Twelver Shi'a 'Amarrids.

[58] Friedman, 2010, p. 42

Balātunos, in the Jabal al-Sahiliyah near Latakia.[59] This fortress was ceded to the Byzantines around 1030,[60] therefore it might be cautiously concluded that al-Tabarani's migration actually occurred before 1030.

Al-Tabarani and his followers most likely were responsible for beginning a process of conversion in the rural hinterland of Latakia and paved the way for the rest of the group. It is almost certain that the arrival of the Sunni Seljuk Turks in the Levant from 1070 proved disastrous for the remaining Alawites in Aleppo and the interior of the Levant.[61] The Seljuk defeat of the Byzantine Army at Manzikert in 1071[62] dramatically altered the strategic balance of the Levant in favour of a new vigorous Sunni ascendency and the Alawites fled to the refuge of the Jabal Sahiliyah. The survival of the group at this point can to a degree be put down to fate. If the Seljuk Turks had decided to consolidate their power in northern Syria immediately rather than turning back into Anatolia,[63] then the Alawite flight into the mountains may have not been enough to save them. There was approximately a fifteen year gap between the Seljuk conquest of the interior of the Levant and their return in the 1080s to eliminate the Byzantine presence on the Syrian coast. This small window, combined with al-Tabarani's earlier pioneering in the Jabal, gave the Alawites enough opportunity to get established in the mountain before Sunni hegemony enveloped the entire Levant.

For the Alawites the pattern of setbacks in the face of Sunni political power was continued and the group was pushed further onto the periphery of the Islamic world. By this time, Alawite enmity for Sunni Muslims had become an official part of their religious discourse. Al-Tabarani, for example, wrote about the

---

[59] Ibid. p. 48

[60] Ibid.

[61] De Planhol, 1997, p. 85

[62] *Historians History*, (London: The Times, 1909), Vol.VII, p. 255.

[63] Harris, 2003, p. 67.

dawlat al-ðidd (demonic rule) of the Sunnis and of the Alawite's eventual liberation from Sunni persecution.[64]

In summary, the early period of Alawite history spanned around two hundred years, from the career of the charismatic Ibn Nusayr in the mid-ninth century to the start of their migration the Jabal al-Sahiliyah in the eleventh century under al-Tabarani. In the face of Sunni persecution, Al-Khasibi took the community from Iraq and found solid support in the form of Hamdanids in Aleppo. This was a good period for the Alawites who consolidated across northern Syria in the mid to late tenth century. The Alawites once again faced destruction with the arrival of the Sunni Seljuk Turks who, with a view to achieving religious unity in Bilad al-Sham, set about vigorously persecuting deviating Shi'a groups like the Alawites. The Alawite reduction to the coastal mountains of northern Syria completed their transformation from an urban intellectual community, with tribal links, to what French scholar, Xavier de Planhol, terms a *Montagne Refugee* community.[65] This transformation saw the group shift from being *Umran Hadari* (urban) to *Umran Badawi* (rural) and from a dispersed to a compact minority. This consistent regression into rural isolation in the early period began the development of Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya. The major legacy of the early period was the commencement of a pattern of persecution by Sunni Muslim powers, which fomented the Alawite cultural trait of sectarian insecurity.

Becoming Ibn al-Jabal (Sons of the Mountain) 1070-1305

In the period from the late eleventh century until the consolidation of Mamluk rule in Syria in the late fourteenth century, the Alawites carved out a new existence in their mountain refuge. While the early period saw the sect's religious identity formulated, the long period of isolation in the physically unfavourable,

---

[64] Bar-Asher and Kofsky, 2005, p. 62.

[65] Xavier De Planhol, *The World of Islam* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1959).

Jabal al-Sahiliyah, played the major role in the formation of the group's socio-economic and cultural identity,[66] and moved the Alawites closer to Ibn Khaldun's definition of a group with high 'asabiyya.

The Alawite mountain refuge, while being deficient in economic potential, was strategically favourable and did provide reasonable defence against efforts to extinguish, or subvert them.[67] Moreover, the relative irrelevance of the Alawites to the major political events of the period worked, ultimately, in their favour. Consider for example, the fates of the more politically salient Ismailis (Assassins) and Armenians whose attempts at political autonomy were abruptly curtailed by major powers.[68]

First, a brief demographic survey of the area that would come to be the base for the Alawite émigrés is appropriate. From antiquity up to the eleventh century the mountains of northern Syria were very sparsely populated.[69] By the late eleventh century as the Alawites were arriving in the Jabal al-Sahiliyah there were only two settlements of any size, both Christian, located in the mountain range: in the south at Safita and Jabal Helou, and in the north at Nahr al-Kabir, both of these had been rooted there since antiquity.[70] This lack of population may have partly been due to the relocation of Christian Mardaite mountain tribes in the late seventh century.[71] In any case, the inhospitable physical characteristics of these mountains were not attractive for settlement by any but those seeking refuge.

In general the populations that existed in the marginal areas of North Western Syria were dissident Christian and Shi'a groups of heterodox

---

[66] De Planhol, 1997, p. 84.

[67] The incline on the eastern edge of the Jabal Sahiliyah is particularly precipitous, which is illustrated by Figure 2, p. ix. See also, Colbert Held, Middle East Patterns: *Places, Peoples, and Politics*, (Boulder: Westview Press), p. 242, for a description of the geography of the Jabal Sahiliyah.

[68] On the Ismailis see, Ibid. p. 85; On the Armenians see, Harris, 2003, p. 100.

[69] De Planhol, 1997, p. 84.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Harris, 2003, p. 49.

persuasion.[72] The Christians, especially, retained a considerable presence in rural Syria despite the increased pace of Muslim conversions in the first century of Abbasid rule (750-850).[73] Batatu suggests that the bulk of Syrian peasants were Christian right up until the late thirteenth century.[74] This could especially have been the case in the mountainous rural areas. For example, the first Muslim conquests in the region bypassed the mountains inland from Latakia, in 636-637 the Muslim troops of Antioch and Jerusalem are described as having "advanced along the seashore." [75] The Christian populations that survived the Muslim conquests were then buoyed by the reinsertion of Byzantine power in the Levant between 963 and 1025.[76] The Christianity that persisted among the peasants of Syria was of a traditional and superstitious character, for example the belief in charms, magic and miracles.[77] Rustic Christians and Shi'ites would therefore have been the kind of communities that the Alawite émigrés would have encountered as they travelled into the mountains in the eleventh century.

The establishment of the Alawites in the coastal mountains of Syria requires further research as the mechanics of the whole process remain very unclear. The group's small numbers up to their reduction to their Jabal-Sahiliyah compared with the relatively large Alawite population (approximately 3 million) in modern times make it logical that conversion must have taken place. Although the Byzantine authorities in Antioch and Latakia would not have tolerated open missionary activity by Alawite mystics in and around the coast and Latakia, it is possible that the marginalised Nestorian Christians[78] and rustic Shi'a peasants

---

[72] Ibid. p. 53.

[73] Berkey, 2003, pp. 117-118.

[74] Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 105.

[75] H.H. Vol. VIII, p. 158.

[76] H.H. Vol. VII, p. 242.

[77] Batatu, 1999, p. 103.

[78] Friedman, 2010, p. 37.

may have been open to Alawite conversion.[79] The urban communities of the Levantine coastal towns were already firmly established in their religious affiliation, whether Sunni Muslim or Orthodox Christian, therefore the rural peasants may have been the only available targets for conversion. In addition the rural peasant groups could be proselytised largely out of view of the Byzantine authorities. The Alawite failure to [re]gain an urban foothold in the towns of the Syrian coast was another factor in the Alawite development as an exclusively rural community (*umran badawi*).

Friedman suggests that the urban cells established by al-Khasibi in Syria surrounded rural areas deliberately targeted for conversion by the missionaries of the sect.[80] It is debateable whether there would have been advance awareness on the part of the Alawite mystics that their urban existence was about to come under threat, which would require their seeking a presence among the rural peasants. Also, according to some interpretations of Alawite theology, one must be born an Alawite, and therefore active conversion would not have been pursued.[81] If this aspect of Alawite theology is indeed correct, then the timing of its inclusion into the canon needs to be investigated. If it is assumed that some active conversion took place, then this was the chief (excluding later natural increase) demographic expansion period of the sect.

The intervention of the first Crusade in 1097 proved important for the fledgling mountain community. The political re-dislocation of the Levant by the Crusaders provided important breathing space for the Alawite community, now settled in the Jabal al-Sahiliyah. The first contact between Europeans and the Alawites may have occurred when the Crusader army advanced south to Latakia from Antioch in May 1098.[82] The Crusader arrival essentially revived the

---

[79] Heinz Halm, p. 159, cited in Harris, 2003, p. 65.

[80] Friedman, 2010, p. 38.

[81] Batatu, 1999, p. 14.

[82] H.H. Vol.III, p. 351

geopolitical dislocation in north-western Syria that had existed previously in the form of the "Fatimid-Byzantine standoff."[83] However, where the Byzantines had utilised the Hamdanid state as a buffer on the eastern side of the mountains flanking Antioch and Latakia, the Crusaders took direct possession of the territory surrounding the Alawites.[84] This encirclement insulated the Alawites against their chief antagonists, the Sunnis, now represented by the Seljuks. It was within this geopolitical 'cocoon' that the Alawites developed their own society.

In the period following the death of al-Tabarani (1034 or 1035)[85] the community, in its new mountain refuge, appears to have fractured and increasingly become politically and religiously diffuse.[86] Local chiefs asserted political dominance within small compartments of the mountain, and the community began to become highly tribalistic.[87] It seems paradoxical that the previously geographically dispersed community actually lost cohesion when reduced to a compact minority in the Jabal al-Sahiliyah. Two factors explain this, firstly the lack of strong leadership after al-Tabarani, but perhaps more importantly it was the physical characteristics of the Jabal itself that splintered the cohesion of the 'Alawites and inhibited the emergence of a new unifying leadership.[88]

The Jabal Sahiliyah averages 1,400 metres in height, and consists of a very broken topography with poor continuity between the various parts of the range.[89]

---

[83] See, Harris, 2003, Map 6, p. 59 and Map 7, p. 75, for an illustration of this comparison.

[84] De Planhol, 1997, p. 85

[85] Friedman, 2010, p. 42

[86] Moosa, 1988, pp. 267-269; and Ibid. p. 47

[87] Ibid. p. 267 and de Planhol, 1997, p. 87

[88] Yvette Talhamy suggests that it was the lack of "distinctive religious or secular leadership" which prevented the Alawites from achieving solidarity but it is likely that an additional reason was the physical characteristics of the Jabal Sahiliyah. See, Yvette Talhamy, 'The Nusayri Leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854-58),' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6, November 2008, p. 895.

[89] The Jabal Sahiliyah stretches from the Homs Gap near Qala'at al-Hosn (Krac de Chevalier) in the south to a point near Jisr al-Shugur (See figure 2.) The range has borne many names; in antiquity it was called Ukomo (Black). The Romans referred to them as Bargylus, and the Arabs following from the ancient Syrians, referred to them as Jabal al-Lukam (Black Mountains). From the eleventh century and the emergence of the Nusayri faith among the local population the range was referred to as the Jabal al-Nusayriyya after the sect

This jagged topography was the result of the movements of the Arabian plate between the Miocene and the Holocene epochs in a process of folding, fracturing and faulting that with erosion over time led to a very "hummocky topography."[90] The range is therefore highly compartmentalized, which hindered communal cohesion.[91] Another characteristic of the Jabal Sahiliyah that played heavily on the fate of the Alawite refugees was the very poor soil quality. The ground generally consists of "poorly cemented soils resulting from weathering of kimberlitic-peridotitic rocks."[92] From the eleventh century the Alawite settlers and converts were therefore, residing in small, disconnected and agriculturally inferior hamlets throughout the ranges.[93] This situation did not change for many centuries. Hanna Batatu noted that in 1930 the average size of Alawite villages was 100 to 250 inhabitants.[94]

Another factor that contributed to the future underdevelopment of the group was their lack of connectivity with the coast. Alawite isolation was compounded by their exclusion from the coastal strip, 175 kilometres long and 10-20 kilometres wide, which separates the range from the coast.[95] The chance of any external interaction to the west was fully closed when the Sunni Mamluks

---

who inhabited it. Alternately the mountains have been named Jabal 'Ansariyya, another name for the sect. The name was changed to the Jabal al 'Alawi (or 'Alawiyya) when the Nusayri sect changed their name around the beginning of the twentieth century. Most recently the Syrian government has changed the official toponym to Jabal al-Sahiliyah (The Coastal Mountains). This most recent name change is synonymous with regime efforts to downplay sectarian identities. The official Syrian Ministry of Tourism map neglects to name the mountains at all, referring to them simply as scenic "green mountains." In the absence of any absolute certainty about the correct name for the ranges, and the fact that the only obvious constant has been their geographic position, perhaps the most appropriate name to use is Jabal al-Sahiliyah. See, Lyde, 1860, p. 5; Moosa 1988, p. 256; Held, 2000, p. 242; Syrian Ministry of Tourism Map, 'The Syrian Coast,' Salhani, est. Damascus, 2008.

[90] Robert F. Mahfouda; James N. Beck,; 'Petrographic/geochemical studies of primary and alteration–weathering minerals in garnetiferous ultramafic xenoliths–basanite, Tartous Province, NW Syria,' *Microchemical Journal* 78 (2004), p. 115.

[91] De Planhol, 1997, p. 83.

[92] Mahfouda and Beck, 2004, p. 116.

[93] De Planhol, 1997, p. 83.

[94] Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), pp. 334-335.

[95] De Planhol, 1997, p. 84.

occupied the coast in the thirteenth century. As described by French scholar, Jacque Weulersse, "their refuge became a prison."[96] This isolated existence in the Jabal Sahiliyah reinforced Alawite particularism, self reliance and hardiness – all elements that Ibn Khaldun would include as essential for a high level of ʻasabiyya.

While the Alawites were isolated from the outside world, they were also isolated from one another. The rugged, discontinuous topography of the Jabal Sahiliyah contributed to the solidification of tribal divisions, and obstructed the formation of a broad sectarian ʻasabiyya. Figure 5 exemplifies the hummocky terrain throughout the Jabal Sahiliyah.

Figure 5. Alawite Village in the Northern Jabal al-Sahiliyah



Source: the author, August, 2009.

[96] Jacque Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche-Orient* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), p. 272.

Geographic disconnection also existed within each tribal federation (see figure 3). For instance, the Khayatin federation has sub-tribes in both the extreme south and the far north with others interspersed in-between. The other tribal federations became similarly irregular in their distribution. The most geographically compact tribes were the Kalbiyya who came to be concentrated around Qurdaha and extended inland from Jablah and Latakia. Whether this played a part in the Kalbiyya's later dominance cannot be known for certain.

In general, the geographic distribution of the Alawite tribes highlights the political and social diffusion of the group in their mountain refuge. In addition, the incorporation of rural Christian and Shi'a peasants into the sect likely made for a highly eclectic Alawite religious identity, especially during their early occupation of the Jabal Sahiliyah. Although the Alawites had developed rural tribal characteristics, or *umran badawi*, as an overall group they were very dislocated. Ibn Khaldun believed that 'even if a [group] has many houses there may exist an 'asabiyya that is stronger than all other 'asabiyyas, and in which all 'asabiyyas coalesce.'[97] The Alawite community at this stage showed few signs of developing this kind of broad sectarian 'asabiyya.

At the beginning of the twelfth century the Crusaders were entrenched in their newly erected principalities including and surrounding the Jabal Sahiliyah.[98] The direct impact of the Crusaders on the daily lives of the Alawites was seemingly not profound. In the main the Crusaders coexisted with the various sectarian communities in the mountains of the Levant.[99] The Alawites were most likely of no real consequence to Crusader security in this early period. The Syrian chronicler Bar Hebraeus recorded that the Crusaders at first killed a number of Alawites (Nusayris) but when they learnt they were not a "truly Muslim sect, they

[97] Lacoste, 1984, p. 106.

[98] De Planhol, 1997, p. 86; Harris, 2003, p. 15.

[99] Harris, 2003, pp. 16-17.

became tolerant toward them."[100] Some people have commented on the 'burly' and 'European' physical appearance of many Alawites as an indication that they share ancestry with the Crusaders.[101] It is not altogether unlikely that some intermarriage took place, adding to the already diverse Alawite gene pool.

In the twelfth century the Alawites would have somewhat resembled the Christian population of the Jabal in appearance and, in some ways, their traditions. Interaction among ordinary people of different religions in the medieval Levant, away from the struggles of power politics, was in the main cordial and often actively cooperative. Berkey describes Muslims participating in Christian festivals, and vice versa, just for the purpose of being sociable, and also, because the festivals closely followed the seasonal cycle of rural life.[102] Whether the Alawites actively presented themselves as Christians, in order to avoid persecution, cannot be known for certain as there are no sources proving such a strategy. Considering the community's previous strategy of presenting themselves as orthodox Shi'a to the Hamdanids, it is possible a similar approach was taken regarding the Crusaders. However, for the Alawites it would have been more difficult to impersonate Christians than Shi'ites, with whom they share a great deal more religious characteristics.

Overall, the Crusader period provided an important opportunity for the Alawites to consolidate their position in the Jabal Sahiliyah and they did not suffer undue persecution. Alawite sectarian insecurity may therefore have subsided somewhat in this period. In the early twelfth century however, the Alawites came into competition in the Jabal Sahiliyah with another minority sect, the Nizari Shi'a Ismailis from Iran (often referred to as the Assassins).

---

[100] Moosa, 1988, p. 269.

[101] For example see Freya Stark's observations in her article: 'Castles of Syria,' *The Geographical Magazine*, Vol.10, London, December, 1939, p. 96.

[102] Berkey, 2003, p. 251.

The Ismailis succeeded in establishing an autonomous 'state' around Qadmus and Masyaf in the southern part of the Jabal Sahiliyah in the early part of the twelfth century.[103] The Ismailis competed with the Alawites in the mountains for over a century and a half until their demise as a power at the hands of the Mamluks in 1271-1273.[104] The Ismaili state in the southern part of the Jabal Sahiliyah could be categorized as a religio-political dynasty founded on sectarian 'asabiyya. The small size of this group and the rigidity of their religious and political structure, could also explain the limited extent of the Ismaili state.

The Alawite situation further deteriorated with the Sunni revival in the Levant, which was begun by the Seljuks but interrupted by the Crusaders. A turning point was when the Sunni Turkish Ayyubids led by the Emir Nūr al-Dīn Mahmūd won an important battle against the Crusaders at Banyas from July 23 - August 21, 1164.[105] The Alawites were now faced with hostile Sunni forces directly adjacent to their mountain refuge. The Sunnis were highly suspicious of the role that the heterodox Shi'ite groups played in relation to the Crusaders and monitored the Alawites closely.[106] As a small and divided minority, faced with a powerful Sunni Muslim majority, the Alawite's situation began to decline once again. The relative autonomy and religious freedom that the Crusader presence had afforded the Alawites began to give way to renewed isolation and sectarian insecurity.

It is paradoxical that the factor assisting Alawite consolidation - the Crusader intervention - was also the major catalyst for their further religio-political marginalisation. The challenge of the Crusades served as a unifying force for the Muslim world in which Sunni orthodoxy emerged supreme. In addition, the re-designation of the coastal mountains of the Levant as strategically salient in

---

[103] Devin, J. Stewart, 'The *Maqāmāt* of Ahmad b. Abī Bakr b. Ahmad al-Rāzī al-Hanafī and the Ideology of the Counter-Crusade in Twelfth-century Syria,' *Middle Eastern Literatures*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (August 2008).

[104] Ibid. p. 224.

[105] Ibid. p. 217.

[106] Ibid.

the struggle with the Crusaders meant that the Alawites came into the purview of Sunni strategic calculations.[107] Nūr al-Dīn "made it a high priority to promote a unified Jihad theory to support the military efforts," which included resisting, not only the Crusaders, but also suspect Shi'a oriented groups such as the Alawites.[108]

The overthrow of the last major Shi'ite political power, the Fatimids in Cairo, by the Ayyubids in 1171, left Sunni Islam as the dominant force in Syria.[109] This was a sustained setback for the political fortunes of the Alawites who were not to see another Shi'a power involved in the Levant until after the Iranian revolution of 1979.[110] The only parts of the Northern Levant not under Sunni control by the end of the twelfth century were the Crusader enclaves of Tyre, Tripoli and Antioch,[111] and the Ismaili (Assassin) enclaves around Qadmus and Masyaf.[112]

The challenges faced by the Alawites in the first decades of the thirteenth century were somewhat ameliorated by an intervention from Iraq. Shaykh Abū Muhammad al-Hasan ibn Yūsuf al-Makzun al-Sinjārī (b.1164 or 1168) and his followers, first arrived in the Jabal Sahiliyah around 1220-1223.[113] Al-Makzun was a descendent of a contemporary of al-Khasibi in Iraq[114] and adhered to the Alawite religious philosophy.[115] His support to the Alawites therefore, was a 'throwback' to the early period of Alawite history, which illustrates that this link still featured in their political calculations. According to an account of Shaykh al-Makzun published in 1972:

---

[107] Harris, 2003, pp. 9-10.

[108] Stewart, 2008, p. 227; Harris, 2003, p. 15.

[109] Lutz Weiderhold, 'Blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad and His Companions (Sabb al-Rasūl, Sabb al-Sahābah): The Introduction of the topic into Shāfi 'ī Legal Literature and its Relevance for Legal Practice under Mamluk Rule,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* XLII/1(1997), p. 65.

[110] 'Iranians land in Syria to fight alongside PLO', *The Times*, London, December 19, 1979.

[111] *Historian's History*, (London: The Times, 1909, Vol. VIII), p. 382.

[112] Harris, 2003, Map 8, p. 83.

[113] Friedman, 2010, p. 52; Moosa, 1988, p. 270.

[114] Friedman, 2010, p. 52.

[115] Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, interview with the author, Antakya, March 29, 2011.

> In [...] 1218, Nusayris [Alawites] from the region of Banyas and Latakia sent a letter to al-Makzun [then the Emir of Sinjar in North West Iraq] asking for help against their rivals, the Kurds (brought to their region by the Ayyubids and the Ismailis.) It was a massacre of the Nusayris [Alawites] in the Sahyun fortress during their celebration of Nawrūz that persuaded al-Makzun to intervene. He came from Sinjar with 25,000 of his warriors to fight the Kurds [...] But he returned to Sinjar in order to double his forces, and brought 50,000 warriors in 619/1222 [...] He continued his battles until the Kurds and the Ismailis fled from the Jabal.[116]

The figures provided in this account are unreliable and unrealistic, which Friedman admits is due to the lack of original medieval sources.[117] There is however, documentary evidence to suggest that a migration did occur from Iraq to Syria around this time. A copy of an Alawite manuscript written in Iraq twenty years before the Mongol invasion in 1258, appeared in Syria around the same time as al-Makzun.[118] This transfer supports the conclusion that there was a relocation of Alawite sympathisers from Iraq to Syria in the first half of the thirteenth century.

Al-Makzun was an important figure for the Alawites in the thirteenth century; his victories buttressed the group against Sunni repression and other groups such as the Ismailis. Exactly how many of al-Makzun's army remained in Syria is uncertain; it has been suggested that around a thousand relocated to the Jablah region, which constituted a major demographic boost for the sect.[119] Matti Moosa suggests that the Haddadin, Matawira, Muhaliba, Darawisa,

---

[116] As'ad Ahmad 'Ali, *Ma'rifat Allah wa-'l-Makzun al-Sinjari*, Beirut, 1972, pp.343-346, cited in Friedman, 2010, pp. 52-53.

[117] Ibid. p. 51.

[118] Manuscript of a meeting between Alawite Mystics, al-Saigh and al-Jisri, Ms. Paris 1450, fol. 176b-179a; Cat: Massignon item 38, cited in Friedman, 2010, p. 35, note. 127.

[119] Friedman, 2010, pp. 55-56.

Numaylatiyya and the Banū ʻAli tribes, and sub tribes, are all descendents of Makzun's army and followers.[120]

Al-Makzun was important for another reason. According to Friedman, he arranged a theological debate against the Alawite rivals the Ishaqiyya (a splinter group stemming from the early period), whereupon he "massacred them and burned their books." [121] Thus, al-Makzun somewhat ruthlessly succeeded in eliminating a schism in the Alawite community, which enhanced their unity and potential for development of a broad sectarian asabiyya.

Overall, the timing and effect of al-Makzun's intervention was fortunate for the Alawites, and possibly for the followers of al-Makzun. The Mongol 'atom bomb' that hit Baghdad and Iraq shortly afterwards in 1258, would most likely have eliminated any chance of reinforcement for the Alawites from this direction. Although Shaykh al-Makzun was a very important leader for the Alawites and is even credited with mystical religious qualities,[122] he failed to mobilise Alawite ʻasabiyya to form a state or dynasty. The lack of cohesion among the Alawites across the Jabal Sahiliyah can possibly explain this. The wider geopolitical environment was not conducive to an Alawite dynasty either. There were far more powerful forces with higher ʻasabiyya, such as the Mongols. Shaykh al-Makzun al-Sinjari died near Hama on his way back to northern Iraq in 1240.[123]

The famous Mamluk victory at ʻAyn Jālūt in Northern Palestine in 1260, against a relatively small Mongol contingent, meant the Mamluks 'inherited' Syria from the Ayyubids, whose rule had been exterminated by the Mongols.[124] The Mamluks were ethnic Turkish slave soldiers from north of the Black Sea, who had

---

[120] Moosa, 1988, p. 270.

[121] Friedman, 2010, p. 53.

[122] Shaykh ʻAli Yeral, interview with the author, Antakya, Turkey March 28, 2011.

[123] Friedman, 2010, p. 53.

[124] On the battle of ʻAyn Jālūt see: R. Amitai, ʻAyn Jālūt revisited,' Tarih 2. Philadelphia, IX, *The Mongols in Islamic Lands* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Valorium, 2007), pp. 119-150.

established their rule in Cairo from the 1250s.[125] Like the Ayyubids, the Mamluks were devout Sunni Muslims and considered groups such as the Alawites with suspicion, mostly because of their Shi'a tendencies and acquiescence of the Crusaders. Thus, they waged punitive expeditions against the Alawites, as well as the Druze and the Twelver Shi'ites in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.[126]

It was the Ismailis, however, that suffered the most severe setbacks. Their main strongholds at Masyaf and Qadmus fell to the Mamluk Sultan Baybars between 1271 and 1273.[127] The Ismailis were effectively paying for their active political role in the region, which included an assassination attempt on Salah al-din,[128] openly allying with the Crusaders (e.g. at the battle of Inab the Ismailis sided with Raymond of Antioch),[129] and generally trying to maintain their autonomy in the southern reaches of the Jabal Sahiliyah. The demise of Ismaili power would have been a boost for the Alawites who from this time forward were the dominant community based in the Syrian coastal mountains.

An important point to note is that the Ismailis had a far more rigid political and theological structure than the Alawites. This rigidity meant that the Ismailis attracted fewer followers and were less able to adapt to a changing political environment.[130] It is clear, by way of comparison with the Ismailis, that the Alawites' political future was in fact assisted by their low profile, their less organised structure, their religious ambiguity, and their general receptivity to new

[125] Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak also explained at length the Alawite perspective of the Mamluk arrival in Syria in the mid thirteenth century, interview with the author.

[126] Berkey, 2003, p. 191.

[127] Stewart, 2008, p. 224.

[128] See, Bernard Lewis, 'Saladin and the Assassins,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol.15, No.2 (1953), pp. 239-245.

[129] Stewart, 2008, p. 220.

[130] De Planhol, 1997, p. 87.

members.[131] In the meantime, the Alawite community grew demographically, and firmly established themselves throughout the Jabal Sahiliyah.

By the end of the thirteenth century a clear pattern was becoming evident in Alawite history, involving periods of social and political advancement punctuated by episodes of persecution and intolerance, usually by Sunni Muslim powers. The early advances of Muhammad ibn Nusayr, and al-Khasibi in Iraq were thwarted by the Sunni Abbasid authorities. The consolidation and dissemination of the sect across Northern Syria was ended by the Sunni Seljuks. The relative autonomy and security enjoyed by Alawites in the Crusader period was diminished by the Sunni Ayyubid victories in the Levant. Moreover, the momentary military protection of Shaykh al-Makzun al-Sinjari was followed by the arrival of the Sunni Mamluks. Each time the Alawites were persecuted they were pushed further into the geographic and social periphery of the Muslim world. Moreover, each episode of persecution firmed Alawite sectarian insecurity, especially in regard to Sunni Muslims. At the outset of Mamluk rule in Syria the option of further retreat and migration was closed. For better or worse, the Alawite community had become *Ibn al Jabal* (sons of the mountain), and it was here where they would have to survive as a community. [132]

Mamluks, Ibn Taymiyya, and the Consolidation of Alawite Sectarian 'Asabiyya

The reduction of the Crusaders after 1291 left the Mamluks in control of the Levant, although they continued to face threats from the Mongols to the east of the Euphrates and their Armenian allies to the north.[133] Thus, heterodox groups like the Alawites residing near the northern front remained strategically important to the Mamluks. Following the Mongol capture of Damascus in 1299, the

[131] Ibid. p. 87.

[132] Khuri, 1990, p. 74.

[133] D. Power and N. Standen, 'Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands c.700-1700, in Reuven Amitai, *The Mongols in Islamic Lands, Studies in the History of the Ilkhanate* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), pp. XIV, 134-140.

Mamluks looked to shore up their position regarding the 'rebellious' mountain communities.[134] They implemented policies such as the resettling of loyal Turcoman soldiers on the coast adjacent the Jabal Sahiliyah in order to monitor the 'threat' posed by the Alawites.[135] The preferred strategy of the Mamluk sultanate, however, was to bolster the economic and social conditions of their border territories.[136] This was fortuitous for the Alawites because on the Mongol side of the border the city of Harran was completely decimated by the 1270s.[137]

The Mamluks did present a significant challenge to Alawite interests however, as a military power combined with an efficient political bureaucracy. *Rawk* (cadastral surveys) were carried out between 1313 and 1325 throughout the Mamluks' Syrian territories, to ascertain the nature of the populations.[138] The district of Tripoli, including the Alawites of Jabal Sahiliyah, was surveyed in 1317.[139] Subsequently, in November of 1317 the Mamluk Sultan al-Nāsir issued an order regarding the Alawites which read:

> [...] we outlaw the Nusayrīs' *khitāb*. After the issue of this order they may not perform any kind of *khitāb*. The influentials (*akābir*) and village *shaykhs* among them should bear witness not to restore their *khitāb*. Those who dare to do it will be punished severely.[140]

The *khitāb* in this context referred to the initiation rites of the Alawite faith.[141] Thus, the Mamluk authorities sought to steer the Alawites onto the 'correct' religious path. The Mamluk Sultan Baybars had already ordered the construction of

[134] Harris, 2003, p. 98; Sato Tsugitaka, *State & Rural Society in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 172.

[135] Harris, 2003, p. 98.

[136] Power & Standen, 2007, p. 142.

[137] Ibid. pp. 141-142.

[138] Tsugitaka, 1997, p. 175.

[139] Ibid. p.170.

[140] *Nuwayri*, XXX, fol.108; 'Iqd al-Juman, fol.329r; Subh, XIII, 35, cited in Tsugitaka, 1997, p. 173.

[141] Tsugitaka, 1997, p.173.

mosques amongst the Alawite villages and hamlets, which, according to Ibn Battuta, were used for sheltering livestock.[142] This order was reasserted following the survey of 1317.[143] For the Alawites, successful implementation of these policies, especially the prohibition of the *khitāb,* would effectively mean the termination of their particular community, which had been developing now for nearly five centuries. Overall, the Mamluk edicts of 1317 constituted a bureaucratic attack on the existence of the Alawite creed.[144]

Shortly afterwards, on February 20, 1318, an Alawite revolt occurred in the Jablah district.[145] The revolt centred on an individual who assumed the name Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Mahdi, which in Shi'a terminology refers to the hidden Imam. 'Al-Mahdi,' whose real name is not known, came from the village of Qirtiyāwus somewhere behind Jablah.[146] Al-Mahdi claimed to have received divine guidance/intervention in the form of a white dove.[147] Subsequently he gathered 3,000 Alawite peasants, declared the Mamluk Sultan in Cairo dead, and proceeded to attack the town of Jablah on the coast.[148] Al-Mahdi then proclaimed the Alawites sovereign over the Jablah area.[149] 'Al-Mahdi' is supposed to have declared, "There remains neither renown (*dhikr*) nor state (*dawla*) among the Muslims. We should therefore rule over the whole land (*bilād*)." This was the first recorded instance of an Alawite political claim to a particular territory. In any event, the revolt was easily crushed in five days by 1000 Mamluk cavalrymen

---

[142] Ibn Battuta, I, p.177, cited in Tsugitaka, 1997, p.172.

[143] Sato Tsugitaka, 1997, pp. 171-172; Lutz Weiderhold speaks of a similar edict in 1310 by the Mamluk Sultan al-Nasir for the construction of Mosques in the Alawite villages around Tripoli, see 'Blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad and His Companions (Sabb al-Rasūl, Sabb al-Sahābah): The Introduction of the topic into Shāfi 'ī Legal Literature and its Relevance for Legal Practice under Mamluk Rule*,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* XLII/1, spring 1997, p. 66.

[144] Tsugitaka, 1997, p. 174.

[145] Berkey, 2003, p.191, incorrectly dates the revolt as 1317, Tsugitaka provides evidence for it occurrence in February 1318, see Ibid. pp. 163-164.

[146] Friedman, 2010, p. 58; Tsugitaka, 1997, p. 164.

[147] Ibid. pp. 59-60.

[148] Tsugitaka, 1997, pp. 163-167.

[149] Ibid. p. 167; the exact extent of the area that this group claimed sovereignty over is unclear.

dispatched by the governor of Tripoli. Six hundred of the Alawite insurgents, including al-Mahdi, were killed in putting down the rebellion.[150]

The causes of this rebellion can be put down to three factors. First, the land allocation to Turcoman soldier-settlers would have been negative for the Alawites, restricting their access to fertile land. Secondly, the Alawites by this stage were seemingly more rustic and prone to superstitious rousing. Thirdly, and according to Tsugitaka, most importantly, the Alawites were reacting "emotionally" against the challenge to the Alawite creed represented by the decrees of the Mamluk Sultan.[151] It is also quite possible that the followers of al-Mahdi genuinely believed that he was the returning *Mahdi* [the hidden Imam] and followed him out of religious fervour.

Taking into account the history of the Alawites to this point, the 'Mahdi' uprising was a departure from previous strategies of the group. Either migration or the judicious application of taqiyya had been the course of action when the group was at risk. The former option was no longer available as they were now territorially restricted in their refuge, however, why the Alawites of Jablah did not apply taqiyya and outwardly accept the Mamluk edicts to avoid persecution is unclear. Friedman proposes that because the Alawites in the Jablah region were the descendents of Makzun's army, their military tradition contributed to their taking up arms.[152] This hypothesis has some credit; however, the ease with which a thousand Mamluk troops defeated 3,000 Alawite insurgents suggests that these descendents of Makzun's army displayed little real military talent or perhaps, just that they were ill equipped.

The uprising was a localised event that did not garner Alawite support. There was no general rising in support of the revolt by Alawites from other parts of the Jabal, although the high number of participants (3,000) in the revolt

[150] Tsugitaka, 1997, pp.167-169, cites Ibn Kathir, XIV, p. 83.

[151] Ibid. p. 175.

[152] Friedman, 2010, p. 56.

suggests that it did incorporate a significant proportion of the local Alawites around Jablah. The failure to mobilise Alawite 'asabiyya at this time was likely due to the diffuse distribution of the Alawites and was quite possibly witnessed with some dismay by other Alawite Shaykhs. Alawite 'asabiyya was insufficient at this point to achieve a military victory against the powerful Mamluk state, although the subsequent Mamluk response would further increase Alawite sectarian insecurity.

It is certain that the wider Alawite clans were punished for the revolt. According to Ibn Battuta a punitive attack was carried out by the emir of Tripoli that killed 20,000 Alawites.[153] Battuta's figure is most likely an exaggeration. It is illustrative that it was actually the emir of Tripoli that interceded on behalf of the Alawites when the Mamluk Sultan in Cairo ordered their elimination in the wake of the rebellion. The emir transmitted to the Sultan that the "Nusayris [Alawites] were working for the Muslims by ploughing the land, and if they were killed it would weaken the Muslims."[154] Subsequently the Sultan spared their lives. This explanation of events fits with the general Mamluk policy to strengthen the communities in its border areas – the Mongol peace accord was still two years away.[155]

For their part, the leaders of the Alawite tribes pleaded with the Mamluk authorities to be included with the *ahl al-Kitab* (people of the book – i.e. the tolerated communities of Christians and Jews) and offered to pay the poll tax levied on such groups.[156] This strategy by the Alawite leaders is revealing in that it seemed a tacit admission that the Alawites were not actually Muslims. On the other hand it could be an indication that the Alawite leaders had given up on the

[153] Ibn Battuta, *Tuhfat al-nuzzar*, p.292, cited in Friedman, 2010, p. 2; Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), p. 436.

[154] Friedman, 2010, p. 62.

[155] See R. Amitai, 'The Resolution of the Mongol-Mamluk War,' *The Mongols in the Islamic Lands*, XVI, pp. 359-390.

[156] Friedman, 2010, pp. 62-62.

prospect of convincing the Mamluk authorities they were actually Muslims. This aspect is important and will be addressed in more detail below.

Overall, the 'Mahdi' rebellion of 1318 was the first attempt by Alawites to assert themselves militarily against a Sunni power. Their complete failure illustrated the futility of attempting such an approach, a conclusion that no doubt influenced the (outwardly) passive conduct of the Alawite tribes through following centuries. The rebellion was an anomaly in Alawite political history to this point, and the Mamluks did not feel compelled to eliminate them. On balance, it seems Alawite economic value outweighed any strategic threat to the Mamluk Sultanate.

Pragmatic Mamluk political and strategic approaches to minority groups were often contradicted by the Sunni religious establishment. By the early fourteenth century the accumulation of the Crusader and Mongol threats inflamed Sunni religious chauvinism. Another factor in rising religious intolerance was the 'Little Ice Age' of the late thirteenth century, which destroyed harvests and caused famine in both Europe and the Middle East.[157] The Sunni Jurist Taqil-din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328) was the most famous proponent of intolerance for religious heterodoxy.[158] Ibn Taymiyya, who would have a profound impact on the future of the Alawites, came to the Levant from Harran as a refugee from Mongol campaigns in the 1270s.[159] His flight before the 'godless' Mongols may have played a part in his religious extremism that even Mamluk authorities considered problematic.[160] Nevertheless, his three religious rulings, or *futya*, (singular *fatwa*) concerning the Alawites, played a major part in their future political standing. Ibn Taymiyya delivered his *futya* between 1305 and 1318. The first, sometime around

---

[157] Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2008), pp. 135-136.

[158] Yaron Friedman, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Fatwa against the Nusayri-Alawi Sect,' *Der Islam*, 2005; Vol. 82, No. 2, p. 350.

[159] Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2010, pp. 178-179.

[160] Ibid. p. 179; see also, Donald Little, 'The Historical and Historiographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.4, 1973, pp. 311-327.

1305, endorsed Mamluk military expeditions to the Kisrawan region (Lebanon), which killed many Alawites and saw the survivors fleeing north to the Jabal Sahiliyah.[161] The timing of the second *fatwa* is uncertain, but the third, occurred in the wake of the Mahdi revolt of 1318.[162]

Futya are generally structured as an *istiftā* (question) and a decision (*fatwā*).[163] The opening part of Ibn Taymiyya's first *fatwa* reveals the main tenets of his theological attack on the Alawites.

> Q: What is the view of the noble scholars, the religious leaders, may God help them to reveal the truth about the Nusayriyya that allow drinking wine, believe in metempsychosis, the antiquity of the world, deny the revival, heaven and hell [...] according to them God who created the world is Ali ibn Abi Talib [...] they have their own initiation ceremony [...] Is mixed marriage between them and the Muslims allowed, is it allowed to eat from their slaughter [...] may they be buried in the Muslim graveyards or not [...] are we allowed to kill them and confiscate their money or not [...] is fighting them considered more important than fighting the Tatar [Mongols].
>
> A: "Praise be to God the Lord of the Worlds, those people called Nusayris, they and the other kinds of the Batiniyya Qaramita, are more heretical than the Jews and the Christians and even more heretical than many of the polytheists and their harm to Muhammad's community is greater than the harm of the infidel fighters such as the Mongols, the Crusaders, and others. They pretend to be Shia and support *ahl al-Bayt* [family of the Prophet] while in truth they do not believe in God, or in his messenger [i.e. Muhammad] or in his book [i.e. the Quran] [...] there are many famous incidents that show their enmity towards Islam and the Muslims [...] they killed the pilgrims and threw them in the well of Zamzam, and they once

[161] Talhamy, 2010, pp.180-181; Winter, 2010, p. 63.

[162] Tsugitaka, 1997, pp.175-176; Talhamy, 2010, p. 180.

[163] Talhamy, 2010, p. 177.

> took the Black Stone [...] they conquered the land of Egypt and ruled it for two hundred years [...] The religious leaders have agreed that intermarriage with them is forbidden and their slaughter [butchered meat product] is not allowed [...] it is forbidden to bury them in the Muslim graveyards.[164]

Ibn Taymiyya's *fatwa* demonstrated Sunni apprehension about weakening Islamic solidarity in the face of the Crusaders and the Mongols, which led to suspicion about the loyalty of heterodox sects. It also indicated a lack of specific knowledge about the Alawites as he lumps them together with other 'deviating' Muslim groups.[165] Moreover, as Friedman has argued, the text of the *fatwa* suggests that Ibn Taymiyya may actually have the Alawites confused with the Ismailis.[166] The question of whether Ibn Taymiyya was accurately addressing the Alawites specifically is, from a political perspective, only a technicality. As a Sunni fundamentalist Ibn Taymiyya put heterodox groups into one category: heretics and enemies of Islam. Politically therefore, the importance of Ibn Taymiyya's *futya* lies in the fact that the Alawites were for the first time, in an official capacity, named as outside Islam.[167]

This was a critical moment in Alawite history as it cemented Alawite religious separation and therefore sectarian 'asabiyya. If the importance of this event is projected forward for a moment, a considerable paradox emerges: by propelling the development of Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya, Ibn Taymiyya actually contributed to the fate of Syria's twentieth century Sunni Muslim community, whose political status and interests would suffer relative to the more cohesive Alawites.

---

[164] Talhamy, 2010, p.179.

[165] Ibid. p.180.

[166] Yaron Friedman, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Fatwa against the Nusayri-Alawi Sect,' *Der Islam*, 2005, Vol. 82, No. 2, p. 349.

[167] Talhamy, 2010, p. 178.

From the time of Ibn Taymiyya's *futya* until 1936, the Alawites were considered in most official Sunni jurisprudence as non-Muslims. This had the effect of virtually eliminating any chance for Alawite upward social mobility in the religio-political environment that persisted in the Levant until the twentieth century. Even after the end of Sunni imperial rule, the effect of Ibn Taymiyya's *futya* was still felt by Alawites. In 2007 Sunni fundamentalists would cite Ibn Taymiyya and call for the 'physical annihilation' of the Alawites.[168]

The rest of the fourteenth century saw the conclusion of the Mongol-Mamluk war in 1320, and the eventual "extinguishing" of the Armenian Kingdom to the north in 1375.[169] This consolidation of Mamluk power in the surrounding region meant that the Jabal Sahiliyah lost strategic salience. Lack of information regarding the Alawites after the fourteenth century is perhaps explained by this geopolitical shift.[170] Moreover, the legacy of the Mamluk reaction to the 'Mahdi' rebellion of 1318 no doubt kept the Alawites quiet beneath secure Mamluk rule and there is no evidence of further major Alawite dissent. The Mongols returned briefly, this time as Muslim converts, and Timurlane occupied Damascus in 1401.[171] Ibn Khaldun conducted his famous meeting with the Mongol conqueror, outside the gates of Damascus.[172]

Outside this brief Mongol intervention, Mamluk rule in the Levant, including the Jabal Sahiliyah, continued uninterrupted until 1516. Meanwhile the Alawites continued their isolated development, becoming increasingly set in their various tribal configurations, applying taqiyya when necessary and generally trying to carve a livelihood out of their harsh territory. In their isolation the Alawites while politically, socially and religiously diffuse, developed a common

---

[168] Nibras Kazimi, 'The Perfect Enemy,' *New York Sun*, June 1, 2007, http://www.nysun.com/opinion/perfect-enemy/55690/

[169] Harris, 2003, p. 100.

[170] See ibid. p. 99 for an explanation of the Mamluks new geopolitical concerns.

[171] Moosa, 1988, p. 273.

[172] Allen Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 1.

identity based around their attachment to the Jabal Sahiliyah. To this day, Alawites like to be known as *Ibn al-Jabal* (sons of the mountain).[173] The Alawites have an attachment to the natural features of their territory which for them is "dense with spiritual symbols."[174] This aspect of the Alawite creed is absent from the early period when the sect was largely an urban phenomenon that focused on intellectual explanations of religion and philosophy without any need, or opportunity, to develop a territorial identity. The Alawites, now removed from the social life of the 'Islamic cities' of the Middle East,[175] developed instead, the characteristics of a community strongly imbued with Ibn Khaldun's 'asabiyya and *umran badawi*.

To the sedentary urban populations of Syria the Alawites developed a reputation as 'heretics,' 'renegades,' and 'wild men,' which was partly due to their detachment and 'mysteriousness' to the bulk of Medieval Syrian society. The Syrian Sunni Arab population, who were also subjugated under the Turkish speaking Mamluk elite, regarded the Alawites with suspicion and often fear. The longer the Alawites remained separated from the rest of the population the more pronounced this alienation became. While the Alawites belonged to the lowest strata of Syrian society, Alawite 'asabiyya was increasing in accordance with Ibn Khaldun's idea that "the more firmly rooted in desert habits and the *wilder* a group is, the closer does it come to achieving superiority over others..."[176]

Ottoman Rule: Continued Alawite Marginalization

The Mamluk demise at the hands of the Ottoman Turks from Anatolia in 1516 left the Alawite situation unchanged and they remained a marginal and despised

---

[173] Khuri, 1990, p. 74.

[174] De Planhol, 1997, p. 89.

[175] Albert Hourani, *The emergence of the Modern Middle East* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 19-35.

[176] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muquddimah*, p. 107, emphasis added.

minority.[177] The new rulers were Sunni Muslim ethnic Turks and therefore emphasised religion as the core identity of their empire, lending legitimacy to their rule.[178] There would be no respite for the Alawites from the change in rulers and their sectarian insecurity remained high, if not heightened.

The new authority, keen to consolidate its power, sought to crack down on suspect groups, including Shi'ites and Alawites. The Ottomans were also concerned about the loyalties of these groups in relation to their major preoccupation, the war with the Shi'ite Safavid Persians.[179] Some sources claim that the Ottoman sultan Selim I (known as 'The Grim'), after obtaining a *fatwa* from a Syrian Mufti, executed 9,400 Shi'ites in Aleppo after he took the city in August 1516.[180]

The impact of Selim's pogrom for the Alawites is unclear. How many Alawites were resident in Aleppo at this time is impossible to determine, however, given that most had migrated to the Jabal Sahiliyah in the eleventh and twelfth centuries they probably numbered few. According to Moosa, who admittedly relies on the 'problematic' account of al-Tawil, the Ottoman Sultan attempted to exterminate the Alawites in their territory but was thwarted by the mountainous terrain of the Jabal Sahiliyah. The Alawites residing in the plains fared worse and were almost entirely displaced.[181] Another problematic report by Moosa suggests that Selim I relocated "half a million members of Turkish tribes" to the area of the Jabal Sahiliyah in order to "weaken the Nusayris."[182] This figure

---

[177] Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire 1300 – 1650* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave – Macmillan, 2002), p. 216.

[178] Ibid. p. 48.

[179] Moosa, 1988, p. 275.

[180] Ibid. p. 275; M.G. Al-Tawil, *T'arikh al-'Alawiyyun*, 4th ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1981), pp. 394–5, cited in Talhamy, Yvette, 'The Nusayri Leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854-58),' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6, November 2008, p.895; see also, Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2010), pp. 181-182; Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), p. 436.

[181] Moosa, 1988, p. 275.

[182] Ibid.

is grossly unrealistic as the total population of Syria was only around two million at the turn of the sixteenth century.[183]

The inconsistencies in the available details concerning the Alawites at the outset of Ottoman rule in Syria make ascertaining any real change in their political environment under the new rulers difficult. It is safe to assume that the Alawites did suffer severe setbacks in the early years of Ottoman rule. It would have taken some time for the Ottomans to assess the proclivities of this group who would, in the meantime, be regarded with extreme suspicion. Similarly to the Mamluks, the Ottomans eventually took a pragmatic approach towards the Alawites.[184] From Alawite perspectives, the Ottomans were very similar to the Mamluks: Turkish speaking Sunni Muslims who persecuted them whenever they offended Sunni Muslim sensibilities or openly challenged the authority of the state. The main Alawite policy during the Ottoman period therefore remained dissimulation. The observation of British traveller Henry Maundrell in 1697 illustrates the ambiguity of Alawite identity during this period.

> [The Alawites are] of a strange and singular character. For 'tis their principle to adhere to no certain religion, whatever it be, which is reflected upon them from the persons with whom they happen to converse [...] Nobody was ever able to discover what shape or standard their consciences are really of. All that is certain concerning them is that they make much and good wine, and are great drinkers.[185]

The combination of Alawite ambiguity, stubborn resistance and their entrenchment in rugged mountains meant that they posed a difficult, time consuming target for complete subjugation. For both the Mamluks and the

---

[183] J.C. Russell, 'Late Medieval Balkan and Asia Minor Population,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol.3, No.3 (1960), p. 268, n. 5.

[184] Stefan Winter commented on the 'informal' Ottoman toleration afforded to heterodox Shi'ite groups like the Alawites, see Winter, 2010, p. 18.

[185] Henry Maundrell, *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem in 1697* (Beirut: Kyats, 1963), pp. 16-17.

Ottomans there were usually far more pressing concerns than campaigns against the peripheral and impoverished Alawite mountain tribes. Moreover, from the mid-seventeenth century the Ottoman Empire felt the strain of maintaining their earlier gains; they faced continual wars with combinations of the Habsburgs, Tsarist Russia, Safavid Iran, Venice and Poland. Thus, for Istanbul the priority for regions like the northern Levant was peaceful and efficient tax collection.[186]

The Alawites therefore became integrated, somewhat awkwardly, into the Ottoman system of millets and the general economy of the empire.[187] Apart from some minor problems caused by 'rebellious' Alawites in the Latakia region in 1691-92, the Alawites served some purpose and posed no real strategic threat.[188] The tobacco industry was one area where the Alawites developed a role. Despite an attempt to prohibit tobacco as un-Islamic by the Ottoman Sultan Murad IV in 1631,[189] the crop came to be an important revenue source for the Empire by the eighteenth century.[190] A manifesto of a Damascus merchant in 1728-29 includes a shipment of tobacco of the Sahilī (coastal) variety from the "Djebel 'Alawi" region, which was by this time one of the main producers of tobacco in the empire.[191] By 1850, Frederick Walpole noted 3000 quintals (300,000 pounds) of tobacco were exported annually from Latakia.[192]

---

[186] Harris, 2003, pp. 107-108.

[187] Stefan Winter, 'The Nusayris before the Tanzimat in the eyes of Ottoman Provincial Administrators 1804 – 1834,' in *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, eds. T. Philip, & C. Schumann (Beirut: Orient -Institute, 2004), p. 109; Winter also mentioned how the Alawites around Safita, in the southern part of the Jabal Sahiliyah, came under the jurisdiction of the Shi'ite Hamadas from Lebanon, See Winter, 2010, p. 80.

[188] It seems that these Alawite transgressions against Ottoman authority went largely unpunished, see Winter, 2010, pp. 106, 113.

[189] Louvain, 'Revue d'Etudes Turques,' No.17, in *Studies on Ottoman Society and Culture, 16th – 18th Centuries*, ed., R. Murphey (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2007), p. XIV, 205.

[190] Ibid. p. XIV, 207.

[191] Ibid. p. XIV, 208.

[192] Frederick Walpole, *The Ansayrii (or Assassins) with Travels In The Further East in 1850-51*, Part One (London: Richard Bentley, 1851), p. 45; see ibid, p.368, for a description of Alawite tobacco production in 1850-51.

By the eighteenth century Alawites developed a source of revenue from the limited agricultural potential of the mountain. Yet, the potential that this trade held for the Alawites to develop economically was obstructed. In 1769 the Ottoman authorities in Aleppo rejected a proposal for a port facility at Suwaydiyya to facilitate external trade. They were concerned about foreign "privations" and the detrimental effect on the traditional land trade routes through Aleppo.[193] In addition to this obstruction of Alawite commerce, oppressive taxes levied by the Ottoman state on tobacco producers were a major burden. For example, Louvain records that Alawite peasants abandoned their fields in the mountains near Tripoli due to over-taxation on tobacco cultivation.[194] Jacques Weulersse also noted that the main beneficiaries of the Tobacco industry in the Latakia region at the end of the nineteenth century were the Sunni merchants in the coastal towns.[195]

The tobacco trade remains important for the Alawites today. The crop is widespread and a source of revenue for many Alawite families. This author observed a great deal of small scale tobacco production in the villages of the Jabal Sahiliyah in 2009 and 2011. The Syrian regime however, introduced new smoking laws in 2009, which restricted smoking tobacco in public places and could harm Alawite economics.[196] Considering the long history and importance of the tobacco industry for Alawites, it is ironic that the first anti-smoking legislation in Syria since the decree of Murad IV in 1631 came from a supposedly 'Alawite' regime.

Alawite legal status in the Ottoman social and economic system was ambiguous and caused something of a dilemma for the Ottoman authorities.[197] In

[193] Louvain, 2007, p. XIV, 212; This author visited Suwaydiyya in Turkey (now called Samandağ) in March 2011, and was surprised to find that approximately ninety percent of the city is Alawite.

[194] Ibid. p. XIV, 213.

[195] Jacques Weulersse, 1940, pp. 324-325, cited in De Planhol, 1997, p. 89.

[196] 'Syria issues tough new law against killer tobacco,' *Middle East Online*, Damascus, December 6, 2009, IRIN, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=36089.

[197] Yvette Talhamy, ''The Nusayri Leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854-58),' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6, November 2008, p. 896.

the early period of Ottoman rule, at least up to the late sixteenth century, the Alawites had to pay the *dirham al-rijāl*, which was a special head tax levied on the Alawite 'apostates' for their 'heresy'.[198] The dilemma for the Ottomans was that according to 'Islamic law' the Alawites should not have been tolerated at all, in contrast to the Christians and Jews who were acceptable as *ahl al Kitāb* (people of the book). In legal disputes also, technically according to Islamic law, Alawite testimony should not be valid, yet it appears that in most cases their testimony was at least considered.[199] It is noteworthy that the Alawites were an important source of income for the local authorities, making up seventy three percent of the rural tax farms (*muqāta'a)* in the vicinity of the Jabal Sahiliyah.[200] Thus, the Ottomans and local authorities often chose to turn a blind eye to the Alawites' problematic religious identity. The Ottoman state was quick to persecute the Alawites however, when they transgressed.

The period of the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century was difficult for the Alawites. The Ottoman state was struggling to maintain its authority in its peripheral territories; therefore it was increasingly intolerant of any trouble in its core provinces, especially from lowly Alawite mountaineers. Ottoman contempt for the Alawites was evident in 1783 when the official view of Alawite religion was that it consisted of "wrong thinking and shallow ideas."[201] When the Alawite shaykh Saqar Mahfouz, of the Shemseen clan of the Haddadin around Safita, refused (or was unable) to pay his taxes to the Ottoman authorities in 1806, 3,000 imperial troops were sent against him. The troops are reported to have "burnt

---

[198] Dick Douwes, *The Ottomans in Syria, A History of Justice and Oppression*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2000, p.142; See also: Bernard Lewis, 'Ottoman Land Tenure and Taxation in Syria,' *Studia Islamica*, No.50, 1979, p.121; Winter, 2004, p.106, mentions another discriminatory tax, the *mīrī*.

[199] Douwes, 2000, p. 80.

[200] Ibid. p. 142-143.

[201] Ibn Jibrail al-Qila'i, *Zajaliyyat* (Beirut: Dar Lahad Khatar, 1982), Vol. 1, p.138.

farms, harvests, everything and took innumerable amounts of money from the Nusayris."[202]

The Alawite situation further deteriorated after the suspected murder by Alawites of a visiting French colonel in 1811. The Ottoman governor of Tripoli, Suleyman Pasha al-'Adel, waged a five month campaign against the Alawites, killing and beheading many in the process.[203] This disproportionate reaction no doubt caused anger among the majority of Alawites who had nothing to do with the crime against the French colonel. In 1813 when the Kalbiyya Alawites from Qurdaha protested against Ottoman repression, Suleyman Pasha responded brutally according the Ottoman chronicles:

> [1228/1813:] In this year the people from the Nusayri province of Qurdaha rebelled from their works in Latakia. Mustafa Barber proposed to the emir of Trablus [Tripoli] to send soldiers to fight them and make an example [...] [Barber] marched on them and beheaded twenty-seven people and took their heads away. The heads were displayed for three days in Bab Āka, and after that he [the emir of Tripoli] sent the minister to Bab al-'Ali [the Ottoman Imperial Palace in Istanbul]. He [the Sultan] gave Barber directions for the province and categorised them for slavery, forced them to return to allegiance. [Thereafter] he left them and sent the soldiers back to their barracks.[204]

It should be noted, the primary Ottoman concern was to maintain firm control and collect taxes; it was the native retainer armies (local Sunni Arabs) involved in these crackdowns, not the Turkish imperial troops, who apparently displayed the greatest religious hatred for the Alawites.[205]

---

[202] Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 501.

[203] Stefan Winter, 2004, p. 108; Samuel Lyde provides details about what could possibly be the same event except the Frenchman is recorded as a Captain Boutin, who was robbed and murdered by bandits at "Arab al-Mulk," south of Jablah in the Kalbiyya district, see Lyde, 1860, p. 194-195.

[204] تاريخ ولاية سليمان باشا العادل-١٨٠٤-١٨١٩ (History of the Province of Suleyman Pasha al-'Adel, 1804-1819), Ibrahim al-'Awra, translated by the author and Jean-Luc Payan, 2010.

[205] Winter, 2004, p. 106.

Recourse to beheading seems harsh enough as a punitive measure; however, if the Alawite belief in transmigration is taken into account the punishment becomes even crueller.[206] According to Alawite belief, the soul of the deceased escapes the body through the mouth. By beheading an individual the soul cannot escape and is lost. Alawites would apparently offer large sums of money to Ottoman officials (which they could ill afford) for condemned family members to be hung or impaled rather than beheaded.[207] Thus, the resentment and despair caused by Sulayman Pasha's beheadings in 1811-1813 must have been profound.

It was likely the combination of these campaigns along with general economic and religious discrimination against Alawites that caused many to migrate north to the Adana province and Suwaydiyya, near Antioch, in the early nineteenth century.[208] The reported Ottoman destruction of orchards and silk trees in Alawite villages would have further propelled emigration from the Jabal Sahiliyah.[209] The Alawites who remained in the Jabal Sahiliyah however, became further entrenched in their sectarian insecurity and hostility towards their Sunni antagonists.

The ruthless methods of the waning Ottoman Empire corresponds with Ibn Khaldun's hypothesis that the emergence of "exaggerated harshness" is a symptom of a dynasty in decline.[210] Conversely, rising Alawite 'asabiyya started to become apparent in the Jabal Sahiliyah. Alawite strongmen (*Maqaddams*) began to achieve significant autonomy and commanded substantial armed followings. The Ottomans often found it necessary to informally delegate authority to some of

[206] The Alawite belief of transmigration is discussed by Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofksy, *The Nusayri-'Alawī Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp.62-66.

[207] Samuel Lyde, *The Asian Mystery Illustrated in the History, Religion, and Present State of The Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria* (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1860), p.143.

[208] G. Prochazka-Eisl, and S. Prozchazka, *The Plain of Saints and Prophets, The Nusayri-Alawi Community of Cilicia (Southern Turkey) and its Sacred Places* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag), 2010, pp. 56-57; see also, Winter, 2004, p. 104.

[209] Lyde, 1860, p. 196.

[210] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 152.

these Maqaddams for tax collection and law enforcement. From the early 1800s Saqar al-Mahmud assumed this role around Safita[211] and in the late 1820s another Alawite Maqaddam, Uthman Khayr from the Matawira tribal confederation, predominated over much of the southern reaches of the Jabal Sahiliyah. Uthman Khayr was able to "mobilise quite formidable forces" and even claimed for himself the title of *Bey*, a Turkish military title.[212] Uthman's son Ismail would rise to even greater prominence in the 1850s.

Increasing Alawite assertiveness unnerved the Sunnis of Latakia and other coastal towns, sparking renewed religious chauvinism. Hence in the early 1820s the Sunni Shaykh, Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Mugrabi (d.1827) of Latakia, issued a *fatwa*, the first against the Alawites since 1516, which according to Samuel Lyde, decreed "that the lives and property of the Ansaireeh [Alawites] were at the free disposal of the Musulmans."[213] Shortly afterwards, in 1824, a group of Ottoman soldiers attacked Alawite villages near Latakia killing thirty or forty men and taking woman and children as slaves.[214]

These harsh reactions against the Alawites in the 1820s can also be viewed within the context of the Ottoman struggle to contain emerging nationalist movements within their empire. In particular, they faced a resilient Greek independence movement in their Balkan provinces. In a repeat of the early Mamluk and Ottoman periods when Alawite loyalty was doubted, the community was suspected of collusion with the Greeks. Hence, despite pragmatic toleration of Alawites during the great part of Ottoman rule, the default view of the sultanate towards the Alawites was hostility, suspicion and contempt. This

---

[211] Harris, 2003, p. 112; this is very likely the same person as the 'Saqar al-Mahfouz' noted by Ibn Jibrail, 1982, Vol. 2, p. 501.

[212] Douwes, 2000, p. 70 and n. 22, p. 70.

[213] Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2010, p. 183; Lyde, 1860, p. 196.

[214] Winter, 2004, p. 102.

attitude is demonstrated in a communiqué to Istanbul regarding the Greek uprising:

> In order to achieve the evil and contemptuous deeds which the sinister Greek nation connivingly forces upon the people of Islam, and – through the advocacy of its corrupt thought – to make comply with their principle of collusion and unity, the Druze and Nusayri sects, who have no share in the ornament of Islam and who are perhaps worse than enemy infidels.[215]

Whether the Alawites were actually cooperating with the Greek nationalists is doubtful. Persistent tribal divisions, lack of any central authority, and their still negligible level of overall sectarian 'asabiyya meant they would have harboured little impulse for a nationalist struggle like the Greeks.

In terms of their status in Ottoman society, it appeared that Alawites had not improved at all. In fact, as the Ottoman correspondence shows, they still seemingly suffered the effects of Ibn Taymiyya's 1305 *fatwa*. This continuity of marginalisation and segregation from the social mainstream was the primary factor in the development of Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya. So long as political authority operated along the lines of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, the Alawites would continue to be marginalised and insecure. In 1832 this system of rule, extant throughout the Mamluk and Ottoman eras would finally receive a major jolt.

Overview

The thousand years of Alawite history to 1830 saw the community evolve from an urban (*Umran Hadari*) to a rural tribal (*Umran Badawi*) existence. While Alawite sectarian insecurity was reinforced regularly, normally through persecution by Sunni authorities, this general trajectory was interspersed with episodes of relative security and consolidation. In the Hamdanid and Crusader periods, for

---

[215] Ibid.

example, the development of Alawite sectarian ʻasabiyya actually eased. The long uninterrupted period of Sunni imperial rule between the late thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries, however, entrenched Alawite insecurity to a point that the community was possibly incapable of successful social integration. Five hundred years of tenuous existence in their physically unfavourable mountain refuge, socio-economic discrimination in the form of crippling taxes and other imposts, along with frequent violent persecutions, such as summary beheadings, was bound to ingrain insecurity as the defining feature of Alawite politics.

This insecurity would translate into strong tribal ʻasabiyyas over the next years. Thus, despite persistent Ottoman contempt for the Alawites, from the 1820s, Istanbul was forced to tolerate strong local leadership by Alawite Maqaddams. This was a sign of declining Ottoman power and a new phase for Alawites as the ʻasabiyya of strongly independent tribes began to have an impact on the politics of the northern Levant.

Chapter Four

Alawite 'Asabiyya and the Formation of Syrian Politics 1830-1970

This chapter examines how high Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya shaped their involvement in Syrian politics as Sunni Ottoman power declined then collapsed. After the Ottoman collapse in 1918, Khaldunian explanations of Syrian politics are complicated by the intervention of Western powers and the international community in the form of the League of Nations. This highlights how Ibn Khaldun's theory for dynastic politics is limited to a closed political system, which is what he observed in the Medieval Maghreb. Nonetheless, Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya, which had been fragmented in the Jabal Sahiliyah, began to coalesce as they increased their interaction with other communities and became more aware of their common identity relative others in Syrian society.

From 1830 to 1970 the Alawite community seemingly made gradual progress towards integration into wider Syrian society. This was by no means a smooth transition; local sectarian hostility periodically flared and until 1918 the Ottoman state continued discriminatory policies towards Alawites. Overall, however, the general trajectory of the period indicated the Alawites' long history of isolation in around the Jabal Sahiliyah was drawing to a close.

The Alawite community's path toward integration can be divided into four stages. 1832-1918 saw the fragmentation of Sunni Ottoman authority and opportunities for Alawite assertion in politics and society on a larger scale then previously possible. 1919-1945 was characterised by 'artificial' political autonomy for the Alawites in the form of the French sponsored Alawite State. This gave way to a pragmatic decision by Alawite leaders to accept the community's incorporation into the nascent, religiously diverse, Syrian state. From 1946 to 1963 Alawites enthusiastically sought involvement of in all aspects of independent

Syria, including the national defence forces and in education. Previously unavailable educational opportunities would allow Alawites to participate in the political ferment that came with Syrian independence in 1946. Hence, Alawites like Zaki al-Arsuzi played roles in the development of political ideologies suitable for a religiously diverse state. In 1963 the Baʿthist coup brought a social revolution that benefited disadvantaged rural minorities like the Alawites. Then the elevation of their co-sectarian Hafiz al-Asad to the presidency seemed to prove to most Alawites that their quest for acceptance in Syrian society had finally succeeded. Growing Alawite assertion in Syria would, however, trigger sectarian suspicions and prejudices that would lead to a 'security dilemma' between communities and the politics of sectarian insecurity took hold in Syria.

In the 1830s the long era of Ottoman ascendency appeared to be coming to a close. Across the empire alternative power centres emerged to challenge the authority of Istanbul. European powers began to intervene deeply in the politics and economics of the Ottoman provinces, including the Levant. In this context of Ottoman fragmentation there was potential for Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya to make an impact on Syrian politics. The Alawites had existed on the margins for hundreds of years; given the opportunity, would they look to integrate with wider society, or would they mobilise politically as a sect? By the early nineteenth century Alawite particularism was already very strong at a localised level. Tribal 'asabiyya*s* had already helped Alawite Maqaddams carve out semi-autonomous fiefdoms in the Jabal Sahiliyah. Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya however, was not yet cohesive enough to mobilise the community on a large scale; moreover they still lacked a leader with sufficient ability to establish dominance over the disjointed tribes.

The Egyptian Intervention and Lost Opportunities for Alawites

The conquest of Syria by the viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali, in 1832 was a major juncture in Syrian and Alawite history, breaking a three hundred year Ottoman monopoly of power. After a successful campaign against the Sultan's forces, Muhammad 'Ali's son, Ibrahim Pasha, ruled Syria for nine years until he was finally dislodged with the help of British Forces in 1841.[1]

Ibrahim Pasha's goal was to consolidate control of Syria and establish a modern secular state. The fulfilment of this objective could have been beneficial for Alawites. Many Alawites of the coastal and inland plains, who were mostly indentured peasants to Sunni landlords, welcomed the prospect of change.[2] For instance, Ibrahim Pasha 'equalised' the tax system which had long disadvantaged Alawites.[3] Other Alawites however, exploited the situation by becoming allies of the Sultan to receive arms from Istanbul to fight the Egyptians.[4] British naval officer Frederick Walpole, who lived among the Alawites for a time in 1850-1851, was told by Alawite leaders on several occasions that their main problem with the rule of Ibrahim Pasha was the issue of conscription.[5] But for this factor, Alawites may not have opposed Egyptian rule so strongly. It was, after all, the first secular leaning political system to be attempted in Syria; a political shift that could have reduced the main Alawite source of insecurity: their inferior social and legal status according to Islamic law.

A good example of the potential for improved Alawite status under the rule of Ibrahim Pasha occurred when Egyptian troops, learning of the *fatwa* of Shaykh al-Mugrabi, tried to enslave Alawite women but were immediately

---

[1] M. Abir, 'Modernisation, reaction and Muhammad Ali's 'Empire,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.13, No.3 (1977), pp. 295-313.

[2] Winter, 2004, p. 105.

[3] Walpole, 1851, Part 3, p. 165.

[4] Yvette Telhamy, 'The Nusayri Leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854-58),' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (2008), p. 896.

[5] Walpole, 1851, Part 3.

ordered to free them by their officers.[6] The Egyptian commanders refused to acknowledge al-Mugrabi's classification of the Alawites as non-Muslims.[7] Admittedly, the Egyptian desire to conscript the Alawites as Muslim soldiers played a part in this.[8] Nevertheless, Egyptian revision of Alawite legal status was the first major opportunity for Alawites to improve their social status and security.

In the event the majority of Alawite tribes strongly resisted the Egyptian presence. As recorded by Frederick Walpole, they were highly resistant to attempts by the Egyptian authorities to disarm, conscript them into the army, and generally domesticate them within a 'Syrian-Egyptian state.'[9] The strength of feeling on this matter was illustrated in 1834 when Alawite tribesmen attacked Latakia after the Egyptians tried to disarm them, and were repelled only with the assistance of Maronites from Lebanon under the powerful Bashir al-Shihab II.[10]

There is a contradiction in this situation which should be noted. Ibrahim Pasha was forced to conscript widely because of the difficulty he experienced consolidating his rule in Syria, which was compounded by Alawite armed resistance, both unilaterally and in cooperation with their former Ottoman rulers. Muhammad 'Ali and Ibrahim Pasha were intent on developing a modern professional army based on a European model.[11] It is ironic then that Alawites would later flock to join the French colonial army, the *Troupes Speciales* in the 1920s, and the Syrian national army in the 1940s.

---

[6] Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2010, p. 183.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Christians and non-Muslims were exempt from the *nizam* (military service), having to pay a tax instead. See Walpole, 1851, p. 186.

[9] Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800-1914* (London & New York: Methuen), 1981, p. 77.

[10] Douwes, 2000, p. 197.

[11] M. Abir, 'Modernisation, reaction and Muhammad Ali's 'Empire,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.13, No.3, (Oct.,1977), pp. 295-313.

Overall, in the 1830s the Alawites were still very much a tribal society with loyalties only to their particular Maqaddam, their tribe and their families.[12] Moreover, Alawite insecurity was such, that they were disinclined to trust anyone outside their own creed. While the Egyptian intervention in Syria was the first opening in the Alawites' long history of isolation and discrimination, Alawite recalcitrance helped ensure that the opportunity for an improvement in their social status and security was lost. This was an example of the politics of sectarian insecurity obstructing the potential emergence of a secular pluralist state.

Regardless of Alawite resistance, Muhammad 'Ali's Syrian project was doomed. Britain, the industrialising super power of the time, was not prepared to let Ottoman power collapse further and intervened to defeat Ibrahim Pasha in 1840/41, reinstalling the Ottomans in Syria.[13] With the outbreak of the British-Egyptian war, Alawites, whom Ibrahim Pasha had succeeded in partially disarming, took the opportunity to fully rearm. Frederick Walpole, who seemingly gained much respect during his time among the Alawites, observed prophetically in 1851, "The mountaineers are armed; it remains to be seen what they will do."[14]

The Alawite Leader Ismail Khayr Bey

It was a much weakened Ottoman state that returned to the Levant. This emboldened some Alawite Maqaddams, strengthened by the weapons they had acquired during the 1830s.[15] Thereafter a chaotic situation ensued in the Jabal Sahiliyah as various Alawite clans fought for ascendency. Out of this environment emerged Ismail Khayr Bey, the son of 'Uthman Khayr Bey, the first Alawite leader with potential to mobilise Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya.

---

[12] De Planhol, 1997, p. 87.

[13] S. J. Shaw & E.K. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 57.

[14] Walpole, 1851, p. 353.

[15] Telhamy, 2010, p. 896.

Ismail Bin 'Uthman Bin Khayr Bin Ismail Bin Kin'an Bin Haydar al-Sinjari (1822-1858) came from al-Lukbah village in the district of Hama, and inherited his father's claim to the rank of *Bey*.[16] His rise to prominence amongst the Alawites coincided with the Crimean war between the Ottomans and Tsarist Russia in 1853.[17] The war with the Russians greatly strained the capacity of the Ottomans in the Levant. Ismail took advantage of this to establish autonomous control in the district of Safita amongst the Haddadin and Khayatin tribes. Powerless to stop him, the Ottomans took the radical step of appointing Ismail Khayr governor of the entire Jabal Sahiliyah (*Mushir al-Jabal*).[18]

This Alawite Maqaddam was now governing a population of 120,000 residents of the mountain, excluding its northern part, but including Christians and many Sunni Muslims.[19] This was an unprecedented situation in the politics of the area, which was greeted with dismay by the local Sunni Arabs who refused to accept governance by a 'heretic.'[20] The view of the local Christians towards Ismail Khayr Bey seems to have been less hostile.[21] Amongst Alawites, Ismail was an inspiration and he managed for a time to unite many of the clans under his patronage.[22] Mostly however, he used his position and stature to enrich himself and his followers, extracting revenue from the population under his governance.[23] Ismail Khayr was also reported to have engaged in great cruelty in the last months

[16] Telhamy, 2010, p. 897; the name *al-Sinjari* suggests that Ismail Khayr Bey was a descendent of al-Makzun or one of his followers from Sinjar.

[17] H.H. Vol. XVII, p. 562.

[18] Telhamy, 2010, p. 897.

[19] Ibid. p. 898; Assuming that the Alawites constituted around seventy percent of the rural peasants in the Jabal in the early 19th century, and taking into account populations in the north, this figure suggests, that the 'Alawite population was now somewhere around 100,000.

[20] Ibid. p. 898.

[21] Ibid. p. 900.

[22] Ibid. p. 898.

[23] Ibid. pp. 898-899.

of his rule. To punish "rebellious subjects," it was said, he "burned out their eyes, cut off their ears and noses, and flayed them alive."[24]

In late 1858 the Ottomans decided to terminate Ismail Khayr's power. The American missionary Henry Jessup, who was resident in Syria for fifty three years, said the Ottomans turned on Ismail because he was "not a Moslem and will not pay bribes enough to the government."[25] But it is certain that the Ottomans already knew (or thought) he was not Muslim, when they pronounced him *Mushir al-Jabal*. It is likely Jessup was partly correct in thinking the Ottomans turned on Ismail Khayr due to his failure to pass on taxes (or bribes as he called them). However, the Ottomans were also concerned about increasing Alawite unity as Ismail Khayr began to establish his dominance.[26] While the Alawites fought among themselves and were divided they were no real threat to Ottoman authority. A correspondent to Henry Jessup wrote in 1858, "It is well for the Sultan's government that these wild denizens [...] expend their strength in fighting each other than in rebelling against the government."[27] The best explanation however, for the Ottoman decision to depose Ismail Khayr Bey, is that by 1858 the Crimean war had been concluded positively for the Ottomans and they were in a better position to wrest back control of the Levantine provinces. Ismail Khayr Bey had served his purpose during a difficult period, by providing a semblance of Ottoman control as their appointed *Mushir al-Jabal*. Now his authority needed to be extinguished.

The Ottoman methods of deposing Ismail Khayr were to arouse the local Sunni Muslims to *jihad* against the Alawite 'heretic,' along with the dispatch of newly available Imperial troops. This reminded Alawites that their religious status was at the mercy of arbitrary decisions by the Sunni authority. There were

---

[24] Reverend Henry H. Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in* Syria (London: Fleming H. Revell, 1910), p. 152.

[25] Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 1910, p.152; cited also in Telhamy, 2010, p. 902.

[26] Telhamy, 2010, p. 905.

[27] Jessup, 1910, p. 152.

major skirmishes between the warriors of Ismail Khayr and the Ottomans but ultimately, the Ottomans prevailed by exploiting Alawite divisions. Other Alawite clans, which Ismail had never fully trusted, began deserting him.[28] Ismail's demise eventually came at the hands of his maternal uncle, 'Ali al-Shila, who shot Ismail (and his son) at the village of Ain Keroom, and handed his head over to the Ottomans.[29]

The demise of Ismail Khayr Bey ended a promising period for the Alawites, who established some sectarian cohesion during his short rule. The Ottomans took the opportunity to forcefully re-establish their authority in the Jabal and sought to break up the momentary solidarity the Alawites had experienced under Ismail Khayr.[30] According to contemporary observer, Reverend Samuel Lyde, in 1859 "the government was engaged in burning villages [...] and murders had been committed with the connivance of government officials [...] as it is the [Alawite] population must decrease instead of increasing."[31] For Alawites today, this dreadful period may serve as a reminder of the consequences of a resurgent Sunni power in their territory after a period of Alawite rule. The fear of such an outcome is a major source of Alawite insecurity.

Although Ismail Khayr Bey was the first Alawite to hold official political authority on a large scale, there were some other notable examples of Alawites achieving high positions. Mehmed Pasha, an Alawite from Latakia, joined the Ottoman Janissary corps in the early nineteenth century, was promoted to *Agha* (commander) of the corps in 1811, and made governor of Tripoli in 1823/24.[32] The local Sunni populace reacted negatively, however, denouncing him as a tyrant and a Nusayri. He was killed, along with several of his family, in Latakia shortly

[28] Telhamy, 2010, p. 903.

[29] Jessup, 1910, p. 152; Telhamy, 2010, p. 904.

[30] Telhamy, 2010, p. 906.

[31] Lyde, 1860, p. 209.

[32] Winter, 2004, p. 111.

after his appointment.[33] Alawites still recalled this event many years later. In 1851 Frederick Walpole was told by the Alawite Shaykh, Shemseen Sultan, "We had a Nusayri Pasha once, they thought him a Turk, but directly they knew really what he was, they killed him."[34] Another prominent example was Kara Mehmed Pasha, ostensibly of Alawite origins, who rose to the rank of Grand Admiral of the Ottoman navy and then governor of Ankara and Çankırı in the nineteenth century.[35] These individuals arguably left behind their Alawite roots in order to seek advancement through the Ottoman military. In the case of Mehmed Pasha, it was ultimately impossible to conceal his origins in the eyes of the Sunni Arabs of his home region. There is no information indicating a similar demise for Kara Mehmed Pasha, who resided far from his origins, in Anatolia. Whereas these individuals are not mentioned in Alawite sources, Ismail Khayr Bey, whose rise occurred within the territory of the Alawites, is seen as an important figure and is apparently even accorded divine attributes.[36]

The geopolitical rupture in the Levant caused by the Egyptian intervention and then the Crimean war had provided the Alawites with a small window of opportunity to assert themselves politically, interact with other communities and to broaden Alawite 'group feeling.' The Ottomans, with the help of Western powers, firmly closed this opportunity. The ability of the Ottomans to exploit tribal divisions in the Jabal Sahiliyah illustrated continued Alawite political dislocation in the mid-nineteenth century. An entirely different geopolitical environment would be required for the Alawites to begin a sustained transition out of isolation.

[33] Ibid. p. 111.

[34] Walpole, 1851, p. 157.

[35] Winter, 2004, pp. 110-111.

[36] Telhamy, 2010, p. 898; although it must be noted that the Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak had not heard of Ismail Khayr Bey, interview with the author, March 29, 2011.

The Tanzimat and the Protestant Missions

The Egyptian intervention convinced the Ottomans of the need to modernise and reform the Empire; this led to the introduction of the Tanzimat reforms from 1839. Stefan Winter suggests that "in the Tanzimat and especially the Hamidian periods [...] the Sublime Porte [began] to perceive the Nusayris as [...] citizens to be educated and as wayward believers to be reconfigured."[37] This policy towards the Alawites resembled that of the Mamluks in the early fourteenth century. The Tanzimat reforms never really delivered any tangible benefits for Alawites however. In fact, the years from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the French mandate were some of the hardest years economically for the Alawites. It was during this period that Alawites began the practice of selling their daughters as servants to wealthy urban Sunnis as a means of alleviating crippling poverty.[38]

The Ottomans seemed not really interested in changing their governance style in the Alawite territory. In the 1860s, recorded Henry Jessup, the governor of Hama, Kamil Pasha, observed the popularity among the Alawites of an American missionary named Dr R.J. Dodds, who "as a friend and man of peace," would ride his donkey unescorted in the Jabal Sahiliyah; whereas, "*he* [Kamil Pasha] could not go through the mountains unless attended by 100 soldiers." This gave the governor pause and, according to Jessup, he requested the permission of the Sultan to try a new governance approach towards the "wild Nusairiyeh and win them instead of alienating them." To this Istanbul sent instruction to "oppress and tax them as of old."[39] Whether or not this account is entirely accurate, history shows that the Ottomans never really changed their uncompromising approach regarding the Alawites.

---

[37] Winter, 2004, p. 112.

[38] De Planhol, 1997, pp. 89-91; Batatu, 1999, p. 41.

[39] Jessup, 1910, p. 379, emphasis added.

Another significant event for Alawite politics, which related to Western Christian activity, was the conversion of the Alawite, Suleiman Effendi al-Adhani (b.1834) to Protestantism in 1862. Al-Adhani, who was already initiated in the secrets of the Alawite faith, came to the missionary Henry Jessup in Beirut and proceeded to disclose all the secrets of Alawite religion, a grave offence in the eyes of their religious hierarchy.[40] Jessup's description of al-Adhani portrays a talented, yet somewhat irrational individual who was prone to drunkenness.[41] Nonetheless, the details that he gave on Alawite religion, all from memory, have generally proven consistent with otherwise obtained knowledge about Alawite religious customs.[42]

In 1862-63 Suleiman Effendi completed and published a book on Alawite religion, called *al-Bakura al-sulaymaniya fi kashf asrar al-diyanat al-nusayriya,*[43] which was also translated into English under the title, 'First Ripe Fruit, Disclosing the Mysteries of the Nusairian Religion.'[44] This book was widely read in Syria as the first available exposé of Alawite religion, long a mystery to most Syrians. Among Alawites, however, the book caused great alarm and many shaykhs called for the traitor's immediate assassination.[45] This 'necessary' punishment was postponed until some years later when Suleiman Effendi visited his home region of Adana, whereupon, according to Henry Jessup, the Alawite religious leaders had him "buried alive." Jessup claims to have confirmed this version of events during a trip to Adana in 1888.[46]

---

[40] Jessup, 1910, p. 255.

[41] Ibid. pp. 261,263.

[42] See in particular, Bar-Asher and Kofksy, *The Nusayri-'Alawī Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[43] Yvette Talhamy, 'American Protestant Missionary Activity among the Nusayris (Alawis) in Syria in the Nineteenth Century', *Middle Eastern Studies*, (2011), Vol. 47, No. 2, p. 224.

[44] Edward E. Salisbury, 'First Ripe Fruit, Disclosing the Mysteries of the Nusairian Religion,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 8 (1866), pp. 227-308.

[45] Jessup, 1910, pp. 261-262.

[46] Ibid. pp. 263-264.

In 1850, British traveller James Fletcher observed that the Alawites "cultivate in their inaccessible retreats a mysterious and unknown worship."[47] The consequence of Suleiman Effendi's disclosures in 1862 was that Alawite religion was no longer so 'mysterious,' which limited the effectiveness of taqiyya (dissimulation). In short, the Alawite ability to remain outwardly 'ambiguous' in terms of their religious identity was greatly harmed, reducing the community's capacity for political flexibility. Much of what is known today of Alawite religion remains drawn from the book of Suleiman Effendi al-Adhani.

American Protestant Missions to Syria played an important part in Alawite history in the late Ottoman Empire.[48] The American Protestant missions were the closest the Alawites came to enjoying a foreign benefactor, something that most other Levant minorities enjoyed. The Maronites, for example, were supported by the French and the Druze enjoyed British support.[49] Conversely to other foreign missions, and perhaps to the Alawites' misfortune, the Protestant missionaries came solely with evangelizing, not political, intentions.[50] Genuine evangelistic fervour was evident in Reverend William Thomson's 1835 request for a mission station to be opened at Latakia to undertake work among the Alawites:

> Will not every friend of man, and more especially every true Christian, rejoice that a people so awfully sunk and degraded by ignorance and vice, have at length come up in remembrance before the church. Without any known religion, without either schools or books, intensely hated by every Christian they have seen, and trampled into the dust by their Moslem lords, literally no man caring for their souls, nor even cherishing compassion for their bodies, thus poor and miserable,

---

[47] J.P. Fetcher, *Notes From Nineveh* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1850), p. 313.

[48] Talhamy, 2011, pp. 215-236.

[49] The British formed an alliance with the Druze to balance the French influence among the Maronites, see: Shakeeb Salih, 'The British-Druze Connection and the Druze Rising of 1896 in the Hawran,' *Middle East Studies*, Vol.13, No.2 (May 1977), pp. 251-257.

[50] Talhamy, 2011, p. 217.

> hated and oppressed, ignorant and vicious, they carry as strong an appeal to the ear and the heart of the church as any people on earth.[51]

Thomson's plea presents a tragic portrayal of Alawite conditions under Ottoman rule. It was not until 1857, however, that the American Missionaries began their work among the Alawites.[52] In all, twenty-five schools were established in and around the Jabal Sahiliyah[53] and a total of 153 American Protestant missionaries (including families) were sent to Syria.[54] It seems however, that the Alawites were not particularly prone to Protestant conversion;[55] in the Kalbiyya village of B'hamra, for example, the missionary school succeeded in (temporarily) converting seven students.[56] There was however, potential for the missionary schools to greatly advance Alawite education which was sadly lacking.[57] The Ottomans responded to the 'threat' of Protestant proselytising however, and in 1874 shut down all twenty-five schools in the Alawite region, an action they did not repeat elsewhere.[58] The Ottomans clearly did not want an enlarged Christian population in their Levant provinces but more importantly, remained convinced that the Alawites could be "reconfigured" into 'proper' Muslims.[59] They seemed incognisant of the fact that Alawites resolutely despised orthodox Sunni Islam, a sentiment accumulated over many centuries of Sunni persecution.

---

[51] K. Salibi and Y. Khoury, *The Missionary Herald: Reports from Ottoman Syria 1819–1870* (Amman: Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, 1995), Vol. 2, p. 65, cited in Talhamy, 2011, p. 221.

[52] Talhamy, 2011, p. 224.

[53] Jessup, 1910, p. 436.

[54] Ibid., appendix I , pp. 797-800.

[55] According to Henry Jessup, out of 650 sworn conversions among the Alawites (and some Greek orthodox) in 1861-1876, only 12 remained actively Protestant, see Jessup, 1910, p. 351; Talhamy, 2011, p. 224.

[56] Talhamy, 2011, p. 226.

[57] Apart from Religious Shaykhs the majority of Alawites were illiterate in the nineteenth century, see Talhamy, 2011, p. 221.

[58] Jessup, 1910, p. 436; the schools were subsequently reopened following Western diplomatic pressure on the Ottoman authorities, who continued to look for ways to stem missionary work among the Alawites, Talhamy, 2011, pp. 228-232.

[59] Winter, 2004, p. 112; Talhamy, 2011, p. 230.

For the best part of forty years, the Protestant missions and the Ottomans competed to convert the Alawites to Christianity or Sunni Islam. By the 1890s neither had succeeded, either in a religious or educational sense. As Yvette Talhamy has noted, this highlighted the Alawites' "ethno-religious particularism."[60] In other words, at the close of the nineteenth century the Alawites demonstrated a high, though disjointed, level of sectarian 'asabiyya. Ismail Khayr Bey's career gave a glimpse of what could occur if the Alawites united as a sect.

The End of Sunni Imperial Rule – New Horizons for the Alawites

When the Ottomans made their decision to join the Central Powers in the lead up to World War I, their fate was sealed. The outbreak of war in 1914 was the beginning of the end for the Ottoman Empire. For the Alawites it was the prelude to the eclipse of Sunni imperial rule, almost constant since the late thirteenth century. This presented an unprecedented opportunity for the Alawites to finally escape from their long period of social, economic and religious marginalisation. Under these new conditions, potential existed for Alawite 'asabiyya to be mobilised in a way that had not been possible before.

The first opportunity for Alawite mobilisation existed during the war years (1914-1918). Alawite military potential evident from the exploits of Ismail Khayr Bey did not, however, materialise into an armed uprising against the Ottoman forces. It is possible that the forceful re-imposition of Ottoman control in the Jabal after 1858 had weakened some of the Alawite tribes. It is more likely, however, that Alawites, similarly to the Crusader period, chose to remain neutral and not to expose themselves unnecessarily. A pragmatic policy of 'wait and see' may have been the prevailing view in the Jabal Sahiliyah.

The pitiful circumstances of the Christian Maronites of Mount Lebanon, who suffered famine during the War, were not experienced to the same extent by

[60] Talhamy, 2011, p. 232.

the Alawites to the north.[61] The reasons for this are not well documented. Ottoman suspicion about Maronite allegiances partly explains their poor treatment,[62] though the reliability of the Alawites would surely have come under Ottoman scrutiny as well. The Tanzimat hope of 'reconfiguring' the Alawites as Sunni Muslims may have lingered. In contrast to 1858, the Ottoman proclamation of *Jihad* in November 1914 was not directed against the Alawites.[63] Overall, there is no evidence of any major crackdown against the Alawites during the war years; the Ottomans possibly wished to avoid raising any reaction from the Alawite tribes.

The Allies, on the other hand, viewed the minorities of the northern Levant coast as potential allies against the Ottomans. The French had an intelligence station on Arwad Island, near Tartous, during the war, and landed thirteen agents on the northern Levant coast at various locations in order to gather intelligence on the local populations and the Ottoman forces.[64] These sources, plus information from a Lebanese Maronite informant, Antoine Eddè, had the French Quai d'Orsay convinced that up to 148,000 local militiamen, including Christians, Shi'ites and the Alawites of the Jabal Sahiliyah, were ready to rise up in support of an Allied invasion.[65] As it happened no such invasion took place on this part of the coast so it can only be speculated whether such an uprising would have occurred. Ironically it was only after the war, in 1918, when the French began penetrating the coast that Alawites took up arms.

The exit of Sunni imperial rule and its replacement by Western colonial rule in the Alawite territory was a pivotal moment in Alawite political history. The

---

[61] Christopher Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, *The Climax of French Imperial Expansion 1914-1924* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1981), p. 107.

[62] Allied naval blockades also played a part in preventing food supplies reaching Mount Lebanon, see G. Agoston and B. Masters, *Encyclopaedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Infobase, 2009), p. 330.

[63] According to Longrigg, 1958, p. 47, the local population generally ignored the Ottoman call to *jihad*.

[64] Yigal Sheffy, *British Military Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign, 1914-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), p. 80.

[65] Andrew & Kanya-Forstner, 1981, pp. 108-110.

political equation changed dramatically both in terms of the situation of the various communities and the physical parameters of the contested political space. The Sunni Arabs of the region had long been the beneficiaries of political and military support of Sunni Muslim empires from Cairo or Istanbul. In post-Ottoman Syria the Sunni Arabs remained the great majority, however, they were now forced to negotiate their interests from a far weaker position. Sunni Arabs had, on the whole, taken a passive role in military and political matters in Syria since the Abbasid caliphate. It is not surprising then, that minorities like the Alawites, Druze and Ismailis, began to assert their interests.

In a good example of the overlap between the 'security dilemma' and Khaldunian theories, the breakdown of the diverse Ottoman Empire led to competition among the various communities to protect their security and interests. It was the sectarian 'asabiyya of the religious minorities that would eventually prove politically advantageous for individuals seeking to establish themselves in powerful positions. Of these groups the Alawites were by far the largest. In 1914, what would become modern Syria was home to 175,000-200,000 Alawites, the Druze were approximately 50,000 and the Ismailis numbered 12,000-15,000.[66] The scaling down of the political arena to a truncated Syrian state meant the scaling up of the smaller actors in terms of their relative ability to negotiate their interests. For the Alawites the breakdown of Sunni imperial rule essentially provided the opportunity to coalesce the 'asabiyya that until now they had possessed only in small pockets in the mountain.

It is difficult to imagine the mindset of the Alawite tribes as they witnessed the downfall of a geopolitical order that had been intact more or less since 1291. Beneath Sunni imperial rule Alawite goals had been simple: maintain as much autonomy as possible, preserve their identity and customs in the face of Sunni

[66] Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 8-9.

hegemony, and generally seek security and subsistence within their delimited tribal groups. The situation in 1918 would therefore, have seemed like peering into the unknown. According to historian, Keith Watenpaugh, the collapse of Ottoman rule led to a dilemma for its former subjects, "who are we and where do we belong, or rather, of which whole do we belong?"[67] Then a novel event occurred. The Alawites were asked what *their* political preference was, a question that they seemed unable to answer.

The American King-Crane Commission of 1919 set out to canvas the Levant populations on their political wishes in the post-Ottoman era. The conclusions for Syria were: the "Moslims" wanted American or British assistance for Arab rule from Damascus, the Druze supported a British Mandate, the Maronites and most other Christians were for France, the Ismailis were mostly in favour of a French mandate; the Alawites, however, were "divided."[68] Alawite indecision illustrates three things: they were uncertain of where their best interests lay in this new political environment; secondly, it showed the Alawites' lack of political cohesion compared to the Maronites, Druze and Ismailis, who had unified positions. Third, all these other communities enjoyed external support, whereas, except for the Protestant missions, the Alawites were long isolated as a community.

It is reasonable to assume that the Alawites were suspicious of the intentions of all the main parties at the outset of the transition period. The only reliable political support the Alawites had ever experienced were Shi'a; therefore both the French/Allied forces and the Sunni Arab Hashemites could have been viewed as potentially hostile to Alawite interests. Moreover, every major power shift in the Alawite region since the eleventh century had been accompanied by an initial period of repression against the Alawites.

---

[67] Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 138.

[68] *The King-Crane Commission Report* — Confidential Appendix, Henry C. King and Charles R. Crane — August 28, 1919. V. 55, No. 27, 2nd Section, December 2, 1922, I. II. 2. 'Wishes of the people.'

French Intervention: Alawite Resistance and Receptivity

From 1919 till 1921 the Alawite shaykh Saleh al-'Ali (d. 1950) resisted French intrusions into the Jabal Sahiliyah from their position on the coast.[69] There is debate about his intentions; some scholars suggest that he was a nationalist working in coordination with the Arab Nationalists in Damascus;[70] others have put forward the hypothesis that his primary goal was ensuring Alawite autonomy.[71] It is probable that Alawites had very little understanding of French intentions in their territory and only saw a powerful military and political presence encroaching on the limited autonomy that 'loose' Ottoman rule had provided.

According to the Alawite shaykh Nasir Eskiocak (b. 1940), Saleh al-'Ali represented the interests of a minority of Alawites who wanted independence and autonomy; he told this writer in 2011:

> The shaykh Saleh al-'Ali was not from us he was from Latakia. After the dislocation of the Ottoman Empire and the taking of these countries by France, some groups of people, families and tribes, wanted to be alone and independent. And it is in this regard that there were problems between them and the French State. But not all the Alawites were against the French. We were grateful and we agreed that France govern us and we were satisfied to be governed."[72]

Although Salah al-'Ali has been raised up as a historic figure of Syrian nationalism by successive Syrian governments (including the Asad dynasty), he was seemingly motivated by localised interests. There was not a unified Alawite

---

[69] Longrigg, 1958, pp. 80, 121-122.

[70] Matti Moosa, 1988, p.283, suggests that Saleh al-'Ali only agreed to peace with the French if the Syrian seacoast was added to the Syrian state; Longrigg, 1958, p.95, suggests that arms and propaganda from Damascus were sent to Saleh al-'Ali.

[71] Phillip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 1987), pp.99-102; Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), p.438.

[72] Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, interview with the author, Antakya, March 29, 2011.

position on the French intervention. Some Alawites felt their interests were better served under French rule, while many suspended judgement until their position in the new arrangements became clearer.[73]

Desire for French support and protection by some Alawites was evident as early as the mid-nineteenth century. In 1851 the Shaykh of the Alawite village of Hinadee, in the northern reaches of the Jabal Sahiliyah, told English naval officer, Frederick Walpole, that a French agent had promised "French assistance, and that they [the Alawites] were then awaiting the order to declare for that nation." Walpole told the shaykh, somewhat prophetically, "He had better not trust to such a rotten stick, and embroil himself or his people with the [...] French."[74]

Consistent with the results of the King-Crane commission, it seems that the Alawites remained politically divided in 1919. The idea of unity with the Sunnis of the Syrian interior was not seriously entertained however. None of the Alawite tribes desired renewed Sunni rule over their territory. France was preferable to the Sunni Ottomans in 1851 and was again preferable to the Sunni Hashemites and Arab Nationalists of Damascus in 1919. Alawite sectarian insecurity meant it was a choice between complete autonomy, which according to Shaykh Eskiocak, was what Saleh al-'Ali fought for, or French protection.

With Saleh al-'Ali still putting up resistance in 1920, the French asserted their claim to northern Syria as prescribed in the Sykes Picot agreement. The French immediately applied a policy of divide and rule, or the "Moroccan Formula."[75] This policy sought to pit Syria's ethno-religious minorities against the Sunni majority, create divisions between rural and urban notables and to undermine the existing political class.[76] In addition, due to their aspiration for a

---

[73] Longrigg, 1958, p. 113.

[74] Walpole, 1851, p. 370.

[75] See Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 159, for a summary of the French "Moroccan Formula" in Syria.

[76] Martin Thomas, 'Crisis management in colonial states: Intelligence and counter-insurgency in Morocco and Syria after the First World War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 2006, Vol.21, No.5, p. 706; Longrigg, 1958, pp. 117, 207.

major role in the Eastern Mediterranean,[77] the French wasted little time in separating the coastal regions off from the interior, which renewed geopolitically the situation of the Crusades.[78] The French deliberately set out to establish an 'artificial' Alawite state that lacked the necessary elements for a viable independent state and would instead be heavily reliant on French support.[79] Hence, the autonomous Alawite Territory was established on August 31, 1920.[80]

In July 1922, the French acquired an official mandate from the new League of Nations to supervise the political 'education' of the former Ottoman Syrian provinces.[81] In theory, the substance of the Mandate appeared to be beneficial to the Alawites. Article 8 of the Mandate document held particular relevance to the political situation of the Alawites and their sectarian security:

> [Article 8] The mandatory shall ensure to all complete freedom of conscience and the free exercise of all forms of worship which are consonant with public order and morality. No discrimination of any kind shall be made between the inhabitants of Syria and Lebanon on the ground of differences in race, religion or language. The - mandatory shall encourage public instruction, which shall be given through the medium of the native languages in use in the territory of Syria and the Lebanon [...][82]

The Alawites faced religious discrimination for most of their history; therefore Article 8 represented a potential advance for the group, putting them, in theory, on an equal political footing. Moreover, the educational opportunities would open

---

[77] Burke III, Edmund, (1973), A Comparative View of French Native Policy in Morocco and Syria, 1912-1925, *Middle East Studies*, Vol.9, No.1. p. 175.

[78] Harris, 2003, pp. 125-126.

[79] Longrigg, 1958, p.125; Khoury, 1987, p. 138.

[80] *League of Nations Official Journal*, September, 1930, Article 1, p. 1124.

[81] de Planhol, 1997, p. 377.

[82] *League of Nations Official Journal*, 95th Session of the Council, Annex 1629 'The Mandate' July 24th 1922, January 1937, Article 8, p. 47.

doors for the Alawites. Implementation of Article 8 could have been a major step toward diminishing Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya. French interests dictated however, that exactly the opposite occurred and they divided Syria along sectarian lines. They established a Druze State, a state based around Antioch and Alexandretta, which contained a significant Turkish population, and an Alawite state in the coastal area.

An 'Artificial' Alawite State

The Alawite State created by the French was essentially a larger version of the governorate of Ismail Khayr Bey, including not only the full extent of the Jabal Sahiliyah but also the coastal plain and the main towns of Latakia, Tartous, Banyas and Jablah, an area of around 6,500 square kilometres.[83] At the end of 1933 this state had a population of 334,173, sixty four percent of which was Alawite.[84] The next largest community were the Sunnis who were an eighteen percent minority and were mainly located in Latakia. There was a significant population of Christians mostly around Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers) near the Homs Gap and north of Tartous. In addition there were small communities of Ismailis at Qadmus and Masyaf (see Table 2).[85]

Table 2. Demographic Composition of the Alawite State (1933)

Sect	% of Population	Population
Alawites	64	213,870
Sunni Muslims	18	60,151
Christians (mainly Greek orthodox)	16	53,467
Ismailis	0.02	6,683
Total	100	334,173

Source: E.J. Brill, *First Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913 – 1936*, (1927; 1993)

83 E.J. Brill, *First Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913 – 1936* Netherlands, Leiden, (1927; 1993).

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid; French figures from 1936 put the Alawites as 69, the Sunnis 17, and the Christians 14 percent of the Alawite state, Longrigg, 1958, p. 207, n. 1.

From 1923 the 'Alawite State' was governed by a representative council based in Latakia with a French governor who oversaw affairs (see Table 3).[86] The council was comprised of seventeen members: ten Alawites, three Sunnis, three Christians, and one Ismaili.[87] The council therefore roughly reflected the sectarian makeup of the new state, and equated to what Lijphart would describe as a consociational political system based proportional representation of the different communities.[88] The Alawites, as the majority, were satisfied with this arrangement as it provided the opportunity to steer the political trajectory of the state according to their interests. The minority Sunnis were, however, unhappy with this situation and the representative council struggled to govern effectively due to sectarian tensions.[89] Like the Sunni reaction to Ismail Khayr Bey's period of rule in 1854, sectarian insecurity and prejudice played a part in communal tensions. Ironically, the substance of article 8 of the Mandate also protected the rights of the Sunnis who were now a minority in the Alawite State and could not be discriminated against.

Table 3. Composition of the Representative Council of the Alawite State

Sect	% of Population.	% Representation	Members
Alawites	64	59	10
Sunni Muslims	18	18	3
Christians	16	18	3
Ismailis	0.02	5	1
Total	100	100	17

Sources: De Planhol, 2007, p. 378, Longrigg, 1958, p. 210, n. 1; E.J Brill (1927; 1993)

[86] The longest standing governor was M. Schoeffler, who was governor of the Alawite territory from 1927-1935, Longrigg, 1958, p. 209.

[87] De Planhol, 1997, p.378. Urban Sunni Muslims and Christians continued to hold most of the non-elected government positions, Longrigg, 1959, p. 210.

[88] Arend Lijphart, *Thinking about Democracy* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), p. 279.

[89] Ibid.

In addition to inter-confessional rivalries, the Alawites were equally susceptible to fighting among themselves and the representative council became a forum for inter-tribal rivalry.[90] Overall however, the Alawite state provided a valuable opportunity for Alawites to begin participating in a pluralist, albeit fractious and inefficient, political arena. They could openly pursue their interests; engage in dialogue among themselves and with other communities. One notable achievement of the Council was a restructuring of the tobacco industry in 1934 to the benefit of local Alawite growers.[91] Another positive development was the establishment of a profitable tourism industry in the coastal mountains for *estivants* (summer visitors).[92] All of this suggests a possible weakening of Alawite insecurity and sectarian 'asabiyya. It seems, however, that Alawite insecurity persisted. This was demonstrated by the lack of migration from the Jabal Sahiliyah into Latakia. In fact as Patrick Seale has noted, Alawites were still reluctant to travel to the 'Sunni town' of Latakia even in the 1940s.[93]

While the Alawite State involved disparate groups previously contained within the Ottoman Empire, its circumstances were not exactly what the 'security dilemma' literature would call 'anarchical.'[94] Essentially, the communities passed directly from Ottoman imperial authority to French colonial control. Nevertheless, the limited autonomy of the various communities provided an insight into the potential for the mobilisation of sectarian 'asabiyya.

According to Ibn Khaldun, the mobilisation of 'asabiyya requires a strong leader capable of establishing their "superiority" and "dominance" over their group.[95] Three key Alawite leaders in the 'Alawite State' were Jaber al-Abbas,

---

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Tourists to the region, including the Lebanon, Alawite hills and the Amanus ranges reached 36,000 per annum in 1939. See Longrigg, 1958, p. 285, n.1.

[93] Patrick, *Asad of Syria*: *The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: IB Taurus, 1988), p. 57.

[94] Posen, 1993, p. 103

[95] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 108

Ibrahim al-Kinj and Suleiman al-Murshid. Jaber al-Abbas was the leader of the Khayatin tribal confederation and president of the Representative Council until 1930. His main rival was Ibrahim al-Kinj, leader of the Haddadin tribes, who succeeded in deposing al-Jabbar in council elections in 1930.[96] Neither of these men had the same impact on Alawite politics during 1920s and 1930s, however, as a shepherd boy from the mountain top village of Jobat Berghal by the name of Suleiman al-Murshid (b.1905 as Suleiman Younis).[97] Al-Murshid resembled in some ways Hasan al-Mahdi of the fourteenth century, in that he began life in a low station but after receiving 'divine revelations' became influential.[98] Beginning in 1923, al-Murshid embarked on a religious and political career that included uniting a great portion of the Alawite territory under his influence (see figure 3). He played a decisive role in determining the makeup of the representative council and even won a position in the national assembly in Damascus.[99]

Al-Murshid failed however to establish his dominance in a way that could broadly mobilise Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya. This was the result of several factors. The French, while mindful to maintain Alawite separatism at a national level, were also, much like the Ottomans, keen to keep the Alawites themselves divided and under control. Thus, they monitored al-Murshid's activities, and even sent him into exile on one occasion.[100] The French (and later the British) were mindful of the value of al-Murshid as an ally against the Arab nationalists and tried to exploit his autonomous inclinations.[101] From most accounts, however, al-Murshid's inclinations seemed mainly toward personal enrichment. It was his

---

[96] Gitta Yaffe, & Uriel Dann, , 'Suleiman al-Murshid: Beginnings of an Alawi Leader,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), pp. 624-640.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid. p. 625.

[99] Eyal Zisser, 'The 'Alawis, Lords of Syria,' in *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, eds. Bengio & Ben-Dor (Boulder & London: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 1999), p. 143, n. 10.

[100] Yaffe & Dann, 1993, p. 630.

[101] Itamar Rabinovitch, *The View From Damascus*: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth Century Syria (Edgware: Valentine Mitchell, 2008), p. 85.

controversial profile, "avarice in fund raising" in Alawite villages (which was especially unpopular during the depressed economic climate of the early 1930s), and dissent among his close supporters, that prevented him from reaching greater heights as an Alawite leader.[102] Nevertheless, his legacy is still felt in Syria and there remains a significant community who call themselves "Murshidis." This writer visited one of their villages in 2009 and observed Suleiman al-Murshid's portrait hanging with great reverence inside the houses. According to some Alawite religious authorities however, the Murshidis are no longer Alawites and their devotion to Suleiman al-Murshid is misguided.[103]

On May 14, 1930, a decree from the French High Commissioner in Beirut changed the name of the Alawite State to the 'Government of Latakia,'[104] a title less offensive to the other communities.[105] More importantly, however, the French delegated full authority to the incumbent governor, M. Schoeffler, whom the Council would now only assist.[106] The Representative Council was reduced therefore to 'window dressing' for direct French rule, meeting only once a year for a month, and answerable in all important matters to the French Governor.[107] The Alawite period of political independence, in awkward association with the other minorities of North West Syria was therefore curtailed.[108]

Despite the limitations of the Alawite State during the 1920s, the experience opened up the political horizons of the Alawites. Moreover, the education that the younger generation was receiving according to the provisions of Article 8 was creating a new generation of Alawites who could envision a life beyond their limited territorial and religious identity. Thus, on the surface the role of the French

[102] Yaffe & Dann, pp. 624-640.

[103] Shaykh 'Ali Yeral, interview with the author, Antakya, March 28, 2011.

[104] *League of Nations Official Journal*, September 1930, p.1124, 'Decree of the High Commissioner of the French Republic, No.3113.

[105] Phillip Khoury, 1987, p. 59.

[106] *League of Nations Official Journal*, September 1930, Article 11, p.1125.

[107] *League of Nations Official Journal*, September 1930, Article 18, p. 1126.

[108] De Planhol, 1997, p. 378.

was beneficial for the Alawites. Certainly the French believed this to be true. French Prime Minister in the 1920s and Nobel Prize winner, Aristide Briand wrote to the League of Nations:

> [...] Not only do these [autonomous] regimes conform to the desires of the population, but they are also in accordance with their interests, since the closer co-operation of the mandatory Power in their economic and social development is the greatest advantage to them.[109]

On what basis the French authorities claimed certainty about the desires of the populations is uncertain. It is fair to say that the French only sought to promote their interests through the continued political division of the Syrian lands. This objective differed greatly from that sought by the League of Nations. The Mandate clearly stated: "The mandatory shall secure the adhesion of Syria and Lebanon, so far as social, religious and other conditions permit [...]"[110] In theory, the mandate sought to achieve a broad Syrian political entity that embraced the diverse populations without discrimination.[111] The French objectives ran counter to this and they instead sought to emphasise and exploit religious divisions.

The real legacy of the French role therefore was to cement the divisions in Syrian society so that when they eventually departed in 1946 no progress had been made in reconciling the different communities. Extending this concept forward, the emergence of an Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya in support of the Asad regime would have been less likely had the League of Nations intentions been pursued. Thus, the Mandate period played a paradoxical role in on the one hand

---

[109] 'Letter from the French Government to the Secretary General of the League of Nations, Paris, June 11th, 1930, *League of Nations Official Journal*, September 1930, Article 18, p. 1100.

[110] *League of Nations Official Journal*, 95th Session of the Council, Annex 1629 'The Mandate' July 24th 1922, January 1937, Article 13, p. 48.

[111] The text and intention of the Mandate mirrored very closely the wording of the King-Crane Commission Report of 1919 that also referred to "religious liberty" and the "success of the new Arab State." Note that it refers to a State singular, not plural. See: *The King-Crane Commission Report* — Confidential Appendix, Henry C. King and Charles R. Crane — August 28, 1919. V. 55, No. 27, 2nd Section, December 2, 1922, III. 6.

bringing the Alawites out of isolation and providing them with educational and political opportunities previously unavailable to them. Yet, on the other hand it perpetuated the deep seated suspicions between the communities of Syria that sees the Alawites continue to feel insecure as a minority in modern Syria.

From the beginning of the Mandate, the French strategically recruited Alawites, along with other minorities, into their security forces to counter Syrian nationalists, but also as part of a general policy of pitting the various communities against each other.[112] In contrast to Alawite reluctance to be conscripted into the army of Ibrahim Pasha in the 1830s, poverty stricken Alawites in 1920/21 were drawn to enlist in French army units by the promise of a steady income.[113] It is significant that while Shaykh Saleh al-'Ali was still fighting the French, Alawites from other tribes were signing up for the Syrian Legion, of which Alawites comprised nearly twenty percent by 1925.[114] This highlights once more the disunity of the wider Alawite community at this time. Alawite over-representation in French colonial units continued after the renaming and enlarging of the Syrian Legion as '*Les Troupes Speciales du Levant*' from 1930.[115] It is important to note that Alawites generally made up the lower ranks in the Troupes Speciales. Between 1921 and 1946 only sixteen Alawites graduated from military academies compared to 128 Sunni Arabs.[116]

---

[112] See N.E. Bou-Nacklie, 'Les Troupes Speciales: Religious and Ethnic Recruitment, 1916-46,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.25, No.4 (1993) pp. 545-660.

[113] Ibid. p.649; Khoury, 1987, p. 630.

[114] Ibid. pp. 648-650.

[115] Ibid. p. 651; In 1930 the Troupes Speciales numbered 9,500 but by 1935 numbered 14,000, see Longrigg, 1958, p. 269.

[116] Ibid. p. 656.

The Integration-Separation Dilemma

In the 1930s the French came under increasing pressure internationally and from Syrian nationalists in Damascus to begin winding down the Mandate.[117] In 1936 they agreed to consider the unification of a Syrian state incorporating the autonomous regions of Latakia and Jabal Druze.[118] The strong Alawite reaction to this announcement illustrated starkly their new political consciousness, their sustained insecurity, but also their continued political division. According to Israeli scholar Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann, following the release of French proposals for the annexation of the Alawite territory in February 1936, "long queues of protesters lined up at all hours at the Latakia Post office in order to dispatch telegrams to Beirut, Paris and Geneva, supporting or rejecting the idea of unity."[119] Ninety-eight petitions were received by the League of Nations many of which expressed 'apprehensions on the part of minorities' towards Syrian unity.[120]

Anxiety about being absorbed by the overwhelmingly Sunni Syrian state was evident in Alawite appeals in 1936 for their territory to be attached to Lebanon instead.[121] Yaffe-Schatzman suggests however, that the appointment in Damascus of Ata Bey al-Ayubi as Prime Minister by the French may have played a part in convincing some Alawites that unity was an option, due to his purported (but apparently unknown to the French) Alawite origins.[122]

---

[117] Jennifer Dueck, '*Educational Conquest: Schools as a Sphere of Politics in French Mandate Syria, 1936 – 1946*,' Oxford University Press, 2006, p.443; Yaffe-Schatzmann, Gitta, 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 29-30.

[118] *League of Nations Official Journal*, 104th Session of the Council, Annex 1742, February 1939, p. 162.

[119] Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann, , 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), p. 30.

[120] *League of Nations Official Journal*, 93rd and 94th Sessions of the Council, Annex 1622, November 1936, p. 1354.

[121] Longrigg, 1958, p.130; Moosa, 1988, p.290-291, cites Archives du Ministère, Paris, E. 412.2, file 393, 8 and file 493, 7.

[122] Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann, 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists, p.30; According to Yaffe-Schatzmann, Ayubi's Alawite origins was mentioned in the 'Rogues Gallery,' by Consul Hole to Rendel, Damascus, 15 July 1932, cites FO 371 16088.

A historic convention occurred at Tartous on February 25, 1936, attended by all the important Alawite leaders in what was in effect a "referendum" on the Alawite position on Syrian unity. Despite French intelligence attempts to portray a separatist victory, the debate was vigorous and the outcome was not definititive.[123] The Haddadin leader, Ibrahim al-Kinj, argued for separation under French protection, while Munir al-Abbas from the Khayatin tribes supported unity.[124] There were also Alawites who were prepared to fight for their autonomy with or without French assistance.[125] Overall, Alawite indecision was influenced by sectarian insecurity about recommiting the Alawites to a state dominated by their historic antagonists the Sunni Muslims.

Meanwhile the sect's religious leaders pragmatically worked to ensure community security within the nascent Syrian state in the event of unification. Hence in May 1936 fifteen Alawite Shaykhs issued a decree stating:

> Every Alawi was a Muslim and that every Alawi who denied being a Muslim and who did not admit that the holy Qur'an was his holy scripture, and that Mohammad was his Prophet, was not considered an Alawi in the legal sense by the Shar'ia.[126]

If this was a politically judicious exercise of taqiyya, it produced the desired result. Two months later, in July 1936, the Arab nationalist and Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Amin al-Husayni (1895-1974) issued a *fatwa* which, astonishingly for a Sunni cleric, strongly vouched for the Islamic credentials of the Alawites.[127]

---

[123] Ibid. p. 35.

[124] Ibid. p. 36.

[125] Peter Shambrook, *French Imperialism in Syria, 1927-1936* (Reading: Ithaca, 1998), p. 223.

[126] Yaffe-Schatzmann, 1995, p. 35.

[127] R. D. 'Une fatwa du Grand Mufti de Jérusalem sur les Alawîtes,' *Syria*, T. 22, Fasc. 3/4 (1941), p. 299, Institut Francais du Proche-Orient; Yvette Talhamy, , 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46: 2, 2010, pp. 185-186; Ash Sha'b, Damascus, 31 Tammuz.

This was a dramatic reversal from previous judgements by Sunni religious authorities such as Ibn Taymiyya. Ironically, al-Husayni's *fatwa* came within a similar geopolitical context as Ibn Taymiyya 1305 *fatwa*. European powers had deeply penetrated and divided the Islamic world and the Alawites and their territory were again salient to Muslim strategic interests. But instead of alienating the Alawites and accusing them of complicity with the enemies of Islam, Amin al-Husayni took the opposite approach and looked to bring the Alawites into the Muslim fold. This was the type of approach that the governor of Hama had wanted to try in the 1860s. The timing and impact of Husayni's *fatwa* was effective and it helped convince the Alawites that their futures would be secure within a wider Syrian, or Arab, polity.[128] Thus in 1937, without any Alawite resistance, the Government of Latakia was officially joined to the rest of Syria.[129] This was a critical moment in Alawite history indicating that despite centuries of discrimination and persecution at the hands of Sunni Muslims, Alawites were willing to attempt integration into wider, Sunni dominated, Syrian society.

The actual attachment of the Alawite territory to Syria was delayed for another decade. War loomed in Europe and the French postponed their agreements for Syrian independence and unity. In 1939 France found justification again to detach the Alawite territory from Syria and allowed Turkey to annex Alexandretta.[130] With France's defeat and occupation in 1940, Syria was ruled by the Vichy French and formed part of the German axis.[131] This was a confusing period for the various Syrian communities, who must have found it difficult to know where their best interests lay. Once again the Alawites did not participate

[128] Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2010, p. 185.

[129] *League of Nations Official Journal*, 104th Session of the Council, Annex 1742, February 1939, p.162; Longrigg, 1958, p. 244.

[130] *League of Nations Official Journal*, 104th Session of the Council, Annex 1742, February 1939, A. 'Observations of the Administration of Certain Territories under Mandate,' pp.161-162; Longrigg, 1958, p. 236.

[131] James A. Melki, 'Syria and State Department 1937-47,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Jan., 1997), Frank Cass, London, p. 93.

directly in the war although they were by now heavily enlisted in the French colonial force, the Troupes Speciales.

An interesting event occurred in 1941 involving other Syrian minorities. Vichy commanded Druze and Allied Circassian units faced each other on the front line in southern Syria. When ordered to attack, both units refused, stating they had no wish to attack their "countrymen."[132] This incident signified a burgeoning common identity among Syrian communities. It would have been interesting to observe the result had the Alawite units faced a similar situation; they were stationed in north-western Syria and were not ordered to the front.[133] The Alawites quite possibly empathised with this national impulse. Having no real wish to remain isolated, and now with a *fatwa* from a high ranking Sunni Mufti providing them with religious credibility, the stage was set for them to continue their transition from isolation, a trend that would diminish their sectarian 'asabiyya.

After the conclusion of the war the French tried to reclaim Syria but were met with strong resistance by the Syrian nationalists, now with American and British support.[134] The French were forced to withdraw for the last time. However, their aerial and artillery bombardment of Damascus on 29-30 May, 1945 left an extremely negative impression of the supposedly 'liberal' allied victors of World War Two. This had the effect of undermining Syrian advocates of 'western' style political liberalism in the newly independent state.[135] Even in the Alawite region, according to Longrigg, the French actions were perceived with "revulsion."[136] This perhaps signalled that the Alawites no longer desired a French presence in Syria

---

[132] N. E., Bou-Nacklie, 'The 1941 Invasion of Syria and Lebanon: The Role of the Local Paramilitary,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Jul., 1994), pp. 520-521.

[133] Ibid. p. 520.

[134] Melki, 1997, pp. 96-97.

[135] Götz Nordbruch, *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 141.

[136] Longrigg, 1958, p. 348.

and were ready to begin integration with the Syrian state, a decision they had made ten years earlier.

The Independent Syrian state and Alawite 'Integration'

The political makeup of Syria in 1946, in terms of its extent and demographic composition, assumed the general form that remained in 2011. According to the 1947 census, Sunnis formed a seventy percent majority whereas the Alawites numbered 339,466, or 11.2% of the population. The Christians comprised around ten percent, and the Druze and Ismailis less than five percent (see Table 3).[137] By ethnicity the state had a large Arab majority with Kurdish and Armenian minorities. The diversity of the Syrian state was a cause of concern for the new Syrian government. Sunni Arab and nationalist leader, Jamil Mardam Bey, wrote at the time that minorities posed a grave threat to the Syrian state.[138]

The new Syrian government recognised the centrifugal potential of the minorities but did not seem to have a coherent policy for dealing with this problem. For instance, there were no policies aimed at reducing sectarian insecurity and promoting inclusive citizenship. Although Alawites had taken a 'leap of faith' in acquiescing to their inclusion in the Syrian state they still maintained a high level of latent sectarian 'asabiyya, which could prove decisive in a factional political arena.

In the first years of Syrian independence the minorities were busy seeking advancement within the new state and secessionist thoughts were put aside.[139] The only real path to a stable income for the economically disadvantaged Alawites was the military.[140]

---

[137] Winckler, 2009, p. 34.

[138] Salma Mardem-Bey, *Syria's Quest for Independence 1939-1945* (Beirut: Ithaca, 1994), p. xxiv.

[139] Ziadeh, 2011, p. 16.

[140] Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1981), pp. 341-342.

Table 4. Religious Composition of the Syrian State (1947 Census)

Sect	% of Pop.	Pop.
Alawites	11.2	339,466
Sunni	70	2,121,662
Christians (all sects)	10	303,094
Ismailis and Druze	< 5	< 151,547
Jews	< 1	15,000
Total	100	3,030,946

Sources: Winckler, 2009, 1989; Reeva, et. al, 2003; Syrian Census 1947.

During the French period many Alawites were enlisted in the Troupes Speciales, a colonial force that had played the major role in putting down nationalist dissent.From this, the taint of collaboration hung over the Alawite community. Thus, the Troupes Speciales which numbered 7,000 in 1946 was reduced to 2,500 by 1948.[141] Exclusively Alawite units, such as the Bataillon de Cote, were demobilised and when the French departed Syria in 1946, 500 Alawites from the Troupes chose to go with them as Avenantaires (mercenaries).[142] There is little cause to believe that the Alawites gained an advantage in post-independence Syria from their involvement with the Troupes Speciales, in fact, it was more likely a disadvantage.

The remnants of the Troupes Speciales were absorbed into the new national armies of independent Syria and Lebanon.[143] Alawites continued to be well represented in the lower ranks of the Syrian army, which in 1945 numbered no more than 10,000, rising to 12,000 by the start of the Palestinian campaign in 1948-49.[144] The Syrian military academies, which had largely been closed to poor

[141] Ibid. p. 341.

[142] Bou-Nacklie, 1993, p.652; See also Bou-Nacklie, 'The Avenantaires: Syrian Mercenaries in French Africa,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.27, No.4, (Oct. 1991), pp. 654-667.

[143] Bou-Nacklie, 1991, pp. 654, 665, n. 2.

[144] Amos Perlmutter, 'From Obscurity to Rule: The Syrian Army and the Ba'th Party,' *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol.22, No.4, (Dec, 1969) p. 830, n. 6.

uneducated Alawites during the Mandate,[145] became one of the few "avenues for upward mobility"[146] for Alawite youths and they enlisted in high numbers.[147]

In 1945 the Syrian army was in a very poor state organisationally and had little equipment, supplies or ammunition. The Syrian government requested training and supplies from the United States, the first Arab state to do so.[148] After some deliberation, the United States declined the request, not wanting to offend the French.[149] Subsequently the Syrian army remained disorganised and ill equipped. Without a professional and disciplined structure the Syrian army became prone to the formation of factions. It may be speculated that had the Americans sent a military mission to Syria in 1945-46 the succession of military coups that began in 1949 may have been avoided. In this scenario the role of the army in Syrian politics may have been quite different. A comparison between the Turkish and Syrian militaries could be informative in this regard.[150] The politicising effect on the Arab armies from the Palestinian 'fiasco' of 1948-49 must also be taken into account.[151] Ultimately, the combination of Alawite overrepresentation in a politicised Syrian army would be important in creating the conditions for the mobilisation of Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya.

In the civilian political sphere of the new Syrian state, the Sunni majority of Syria was prepared to live with the Alawites, as long as they did not overstep certain bounds or threaten the unity of the state. The colourful career of Suleiman al-Murshid, for example, was abruptly ended in 1946, when he was executed in

---

[145] Bou-Nacklie, 1993, pp. 654-655.

[146] Perlmutter, 1969, p. 830, n. 6.

[147] Batatu, 1981, p. 342; Batatu, 1999, p. 158; Eliezer Be'eri, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), p. 336.

[148] James A. Melki, 'Syria and State Department 1937-47,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Jan., 1997), p. 102.

[149] Ibid. pp. 102-103.

[150] This is not to say that the Turkish Military has not been involved in Turkish politics; however, in terms of consistently passing power back to civilian politicians, the Turkish military stands in contrast with the Syrian armed forces.

[151] Amos Perlmutter, 'From Obscurity to Rule: The Syrian Army and the Ba'th Party,' *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol.22, No.4 (1969), p. 830.

Damascus by the new Syrian government for posing a threat to Syrian unity.[152] While al-Murshid's execution was committed in the name of national unity, it had the effect of alienating the Murshidis, who would not forgive the (mostly) Sunni authorities for this blasphemous deed. Murshidi sectarian 'asabiyya was perhaps stronger at this point than other Alawite groups. This was demonstrated when al-Murshid's son, Mujib, attempted a Murshidi revolt in 1952.[153]

For Alawites in general, however, the Syrian political arena of the late 1940s was dynamic and exciting, anything seemed possible. Alawites began descending the Jabal Sahiliyah in droves seeking new opportunities and a better life, although the return option was never cut off completely.[154] A key figure for Alawites at this time was, ironically, a Sunni by the name of Akram Hawrani from Hama. Through his Arab Socialist Party (ASP) Hawrani played a major role in furthering the political goals of the peasant classes of all sects. Hence he became a focal point for Alawite social and political aspirations. [155]

A new generation of educated Alawites began to engage in national politics during the early period of independence. In 1939 the French had allowed Turkey to annex the Sanjak of Alexandretta (now Hatay), which had a significant Turkish population. The Arabs of Alexandretta, including many Alawites were however, dismayed to be cut off from the Arab nation.[156] Many migrated to Syria, including an Alawite teacher named Zaki al-Arsuzi (d.1968).[157] Arsuzi was deeply affected

---

[152] Gitta Yaffe & Uriel Dann, 'Suleiman al-Murshid: Beginnings of an Alawi Leader,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), p. 638; see also: Longrigg, 1958, p. 344, for a description of the Suleiman al-Murshid's demise.

[153] Mahmud Faksh, The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.20, No.2 (April 1984), p. 139.

[154] As observed by this researcher during field work in 2009 and 2011, Alawites still conduct dual lives: waged employment in the city and small scale agriculture in their villages in the Jabal al-Sahiliyah.

[155] Seale, 1988, p. 66.

[156] According to the 1933 census in 1933 there were 54,200 Arab Alawites in the Alexandretta region, compared to 20,400 Sunni Arabs and 70,800 (mainly Sunni) Turks, cited in Longrigg, 1958, p. 238, n. 2.

[157] See Keith D. Watenpaugh, 'Creating Phantoms: Zaki al-Arsuzi, the Alexandretta Crisis, and Formation of Modern Arab Nationalism in Syria, *International Journal Of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 28, 1996, pp. 363-389.

by the loss of Alexandretta by the Arab 'nation,' and he felt the Arabic language and culture were under threat.[158] This moved him to establish a party named *al-Ba'ath al-Arabi* (Arabic renaissance/resurrection) in Damascus, beginning with only five members.[159] His message was very close in substance to that of the founders of the Ba'ath Party, Michel Aflaq and Salah al Din al Bitar,[160] who preached a message of secular Arab nationalism, or an Arab renaissance based around the Arabic language. Whether Arsuzi was the actual originator of the Ba'ath is a moot point; in his later life he withdrew into obscurity and died in poverty. He has however, been credited with drawing many Alawites towards the Ba'ath Party.[161] After Arsuzi's withdrawal from political life another Alawite, Dr Wahib al-Ghanim, a physician from Latakia and an associate of Arsuzi, played a key role in extending the Ba'ath cadres among Alawites around Latakia.[162] By this stage the two strains of the Ba'ath came together.[163] In the late 1940s al-Ghanim had a strong political influence on a young and gifted Alawite student from Qurdaha and the Kalbiyya tribe, by the name of Hafiz al-Asad.[164]

For young Alawites like Hafiz al-Asad the political situation seemed to be evolving favourably. Centuries of isolation and repression were seemingly left behind, and this new generation yearned for a better life than their ancestors had experienced. The naive exuberance of rural Alawites descending from the Jabal Sahiliyah soon began to push up against long established traditions of urban

---

[158] Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, interview with the author, Antakya, March 29, 2011. The Shaykh also mentioned two other prominent individuals who moved to Syria at this time: Hasan Jabara, who would be part of Hosni Zaim's government in Syria, and the Shaykh Nasr al-Din Seifa.

[159] Nabil M. Kaylani, 'The Rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940-1958: Political Success, Party Failure,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.3, Issue.1 (January 1972), pp. 3-4.

[160] Gordon Torrey, H. 'The Ba'th: Ideology and Practice,' Middle *East Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1969), p.445.

[161] Jasim Abdulghanim, *Iraq and Iran, the Crisis Years* (Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 27.

[162] Michael van Dusen, 'Political Integration and Regionalism in Syria,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 26, No.2, (Spring 1972), p. 133.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London, I.B Taurus, 1989), p. 34; Ibid. p. 27.

Sunni chauvinism. There was a 'glass ceiling' in Syrian society that held back the aspirations of Alawites like Hafiz al-Asad. Overall however, in the first years of Syrian independence there was little indication of an imminent mobilisation of Alawite 'asabiyya. Alawites descended the mountain to interact with wider Syrian society for the first time since the Hamdanid period. However, their attempts to integrate came within a context of continued Sunni prejudice; this would prove a catalyst for the unconnected Alawite tribes to start unifying as a sect.

The Slide into Sectarianism

In the 1950s the tension between the 'raw' rural young Alawites and the stablished social mores of the 'Islamic cities' of Aleppo and Damascus became palpable. A Syrian army cartoon entitled, "Those whom the people scorn," depicts this tension in a cautionary warning to its rural recruits about their behaviour in the more 'refined' urban environment (see figure 6). [165] The urban Sunni Arabs' condescending view of these rural émigrés, which included rural Sunnis as well as minorities in the 1950s, reveals a mindset which could not fathom that these rustics could pose a threat to the natural political structure that saw them 'rightfully' at the top.[166] The army was long considered an occupation for lower classes and ethnic outsiders such as Turks and Kurds, who were generally Sunni and therefore, had interests in maintaining the status quo in the cities as far as the urban merchant and religious classes went. At this juncture in Syrian history therefore, it can be said that the urban Sunni Arabs had a very low level of 'asabiyya; they certainly possessed few of the ingredients that Ibn Khaldun lists as necessary for a strong 'asabiyya.[167]

---

[165] Cartoon from the Syrian Ministry of Defense magazine *Al-Jundi*, 1 September 1955, republished in Kevin W. Martin, 'Peasants into Syrians,' , *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 41 (2009), p. 4.

[166] The Sunni Officer Amin Hafiz's inability to recognise the "machinations of his minority subordinates" is a good example of this; Martin Seymour calls this a "Caesar –Brutus syndrome," see M. Seymour, 'The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt, *'Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan., 1970), p. 37.

[167] Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), p. 441.

Figure 6. **"Those whom the people scorn"**



Cartoon from the Syrian Ministry of Defence magazine *Al-Jundi*, 1 September, 1955

Conversely, the Alawites, having developed high levels of 'asabiyya in their tribal groups, finally began to develop a common sectarian 'asabiyya. This occurred as a result of increased exposure to wider Syrian society, leading to realization of their common identity and interests.

It was not the Alawites, however, who first asserted their higher 'asabiyya in the fledgling Syrian state. In the wake of the military disaster against Israel in 1948 the civilian political leadership suffered the backlash of public anger and in 1949 a military coup installed the Kurdish colonel, Hosni Zai'm, as President.[168] According to Jordi Tejel, Zai'm attempted to mobilize an ethnic Kurdish 'asabiyya in combination with an ideology of Syrian nationalism to support his rule.[169] As non-Arabs, Kurdish political interests were best served by a Syrian rather than an

[168]Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2006, p.299; Martin Seymour, 'The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt, '*Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan., 1970), p. 43.

[169] Tejel, 2009, pp. 46-49.

Arab identity. Being mainly Sunni Muslims the Kurds had no problem associating themselves with the sectarian majority in Syria, but the victory of Arab nationalism would see them marginalised.

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) was a major political vehicle for the Kurds; its ideology of Syrian nationalism suited their particular interests.[170] The Alawites (and Christians) were also drawn to the SSNP because of its secular and socialist focus and its willingness to incorporate heterogeneous groups under a single Syrian banner.[171] Moreover, the Alawites would not be as insignificant within a national identity limited to the Syrian lands, whereas Arab nationalism included a large geographical area incorporating an overwhelming majority of the Alawites' historic antagonists, the Sunni Muslims. The decline of the SSNP from around 1955 and the victory of Arab nationalism was a blow to the long term political aspirations of the Kurds.[172] The Alawites however, had room to manoeuvre. As ethnic Arabs the Ba'ath Party's secular vision of Arab nationalism could still have them included within the Syrian majority. Thus, from the time of the SSNP's decline an increasing number of Alawites began to join the Ba'ath Party. The *Ba'ath* (literally renaissance or resurrection) ideology was centred on radical secularism and socialism. The basic premise of the party was that the defining source of identity for the nation should be Arabic language, to which was ascribed almost religious significance. While secularism was to be strictly maintained, the special status of Islam was acknowledged, in particular, because it encapsulated in the Quran and other Arab traditions the beauty of the Arabic language. Arab nationalism was the other defining feature of Ba'athist ideology

---

[170] Ibid. p. 46.

[171] Van Dusen, 1972, p. 132.

[172] On August 23, 1962 Syria was first proclaimed 'The Syrian Arab Republic' and an ensuing special census stripped 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian citizenship, Tejel, 2009, p.50; On the SSNP, see Daniel Pipes, 'Radical Politics and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Aug., 1988), p. 303-324.

and the political unification of all the Arabic speaking people was the ultimate goal.[173]

Despite the radical secularism of the Ba'ath, Alawites did not limit their options to secularism as a means to improve their security in Syrian society. A parallel strategy of trying to promote themselves as orthodox Muslims continued in the 1950s. In 1952 Alawite religious leaders successfully made a request to the Mufti of the Syrian Republic to be recognized as part of the Twelver Shi'ite creed.[174] Then in 1958 a historic *fatwa* from the al-Azhar religious school in Cairo recognized Twelver Shiites as 'religiously correct.'[175] The combination of these two rulings, along with the Husayni *fatwa* of 1936, put the Alawites nominally back inside the Muslim fold and in a better political situation in the overwhelmingly Sunni state of Syria. This, along with the rise of the Ba'ath Party in Syrian politics, was another major step in diminishing Alawite insecurity.

The 1950s were a turbulent period in Syrian politics as various communities and individuals manoeuvred to try and promote their interests. After the military coups of 1949, Sunni Arabs tried to re-establish a role in the military as it became clear that the military was the only reliable path to political power. The Sunni Arabs' lack of 'asabiyya however, limited their ability to present a united front. Successive internecine purges of senior Sunni officers depleted their presence in the top ranks and members of the minorities began to filter into the middle ranks of the army. By 1963 the Alawites constituted sixty five percent of non-commissioned officers and an even larger proportion of the common

---

[173] See Gordon Torrey, 'The Ba'th: Ideology and Practice,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 445-470; Ulrike Freitag, 'Historical Correctness: The Ba'th Party in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Jan, 1999), pp. 1-16; Nabil, M. Kaylani, 'The Rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940-1958: Political Success, Party Failure,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue. 1 (January 1972), pp. 3-23; Malcolm Kerr, 'Hafiz Asad and the Changing Patterns of Syrian Politics,' *International Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Summer 1973), pp. 689-706; Amos Perlmutter, 'From Obscurity to Rule: The Syrian Army and the Ba'th Party,' *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol.22, No.4, (Dec, 1969) pp.827-845;

[174] Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46: 2, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 187.

[175] Ibid. p. 187.

soldiers.[176] This was as far as non-Sunni individuals could ascend under prevailing social norms. In the late 1950s some of these lower ranking minority officers began questioning the Syrian political status quo and began cooperating together behind the scenes.

The establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958 joined Syria to Egypt as one state. For the Ba'athists it was the first step in the consummation of their official ideology for a pan-Arab nation. For Alawites who had joined the cadres of the Ba'ath Party it meant the realization of the 'downside' of Ba'ath policy to their interests. They were now part of a much larger polity with a huge Sunni majority. In Syria they were an eleven percent minority. In the UAR they were all of a sudden a tiny minority amidst a 'sea' of Sunni Muslims.[177] Moreover, Egyptian officials, in a re-enactment of the 1830s, began interfering with Alawite autonomy in their mountain territory and the neighbouring Ghab.[178] In addition, the establishment of the UAR led to the dissolution of the Ba'ath Party, which removed the main vehicle of Alawite political aspirations.[179] In short, the Alawites were happy to go along with the theories behind Ba'athism, but it was not in their interests to see them fully implemented. Although the Alawites technically belonged to the UAR majority as Arabs, the spectre of their long history of oppression by the Sunnis prevented them from developing any real enthusiasm for actual pan-Arabism.[180] For them Syria was a quite big enough political arena for them to negotiate their interests.

---

[176] Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), p. 341.

[177] Martin Seymour, 'The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan., 1970), p. 39.

[178] For examples of Egyptian agricultural schemes in the Alawite territory see, Nevill Barbour, 'Impressions of the United Arab Republic,' *International Affairs,* Vol. 36, No. 1 (Jan., 1960), p. 28.

[179] Gordon Torrey, 'The Ba'th: Ideology and Practice,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol.23, No.4 (Autumn 1969), pp. 457-458.

[180] Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria Under the Ba'th, 1963-66: The Army-Party Symbiosis* (Israel Universities Press, 1972), pp. 24-25.

During the UAR period many Syrian military personnel were stationed in Egypt. A group of these officers, all from Syrian minorities, began meeting in 1959 to discuss Syrian politics, the merits of the UAR, and possible courses of action. This group come to be known as the Military Committee and would play a major role in the events of the following years. The majority of the group was Alawite, including the most influential members Salah Jadid, Hafiz al-Asad, and Muhammad Umran, while the other two original members were Ismailis.[181] Some authors have tried to prove that the Military Committee was the beginning of a deliberate plot by Alawites to capture power in Syria.[182] Others have suggested that the *raison d'être* of the Military Committee members was simple *"revanchisme"* on the part of the sectarian minorities.[183] This author has previously suggested that its aims were based more on the personal ambition of its members,[184] however, the truth is likely somewhere in-between.

The simple fact that the original members of the Military Committee were all from minorities suggests that they had, at first, common goals based around the circumstances of their communities.[185] In the political environment of the late 1950s, personal ambition was often limited by social background. Real political power was still the domain of the urban Sunni aristocratic families and Sunni Army officers.[186] For the Military Committee members, an upheaval of the political hierarchy would remove impediments to their political ambitions.[187] The

---

[181] Martin Seymour, 'The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt, *'Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan., 1970), p. 39.

[182] Annie Laurent, 'Syria-Liban: faux frères jumaux,' *Politique Ètrangère*, Vol. 48 (1983) p. 598; Moosa, 1988, pp. 301-302.

[183] Martin Seymour, 'The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt, *'Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan., 1970), p. 39.

[184] Leon Goldsmith, 'Unearthing the Alawites, The Political Geography of the Alawite Community of Syria,' Dunedin, Honours Dissertation, (unpublished) University of Otago, New Zealand, 2007, p. 43.

[185] It must be noted that when the Military Committee was expanded to fifteen members it included six Sunnis from poor rural backgrounds, see Van Dam, 1996, p. 175, n. 69.

[186] Martin Seymour, 'The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt, p.39; Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), Middle East Institute, p. 341.

[187] Seale, 1988, p. 64.

religious minorities were overwhelmingly amongst the poorest sectors of society, so the objectives of the Military Committee could also be defined as seeking a social revolution in Syria that would benefit them and their communities.[188] This conclusion is supported by fact that in the first two decades of Syrian independence it seems the Alawites (and other sectarian minorities) had fared no better than before. The 1960 census listed the Alawite population as 495,000, or 10.6 percent of the total population, compared with 11.2 percent in 1947.[189] The Alawite population was declining in proportion to other Syrian communities, which indicates a higher mortality rate from a lower standard of living.[190] Hence, the independent period and Syrian nationalist policies had, so far, not provided much benefit to the Alawites.

On September 28, 1961 the UAR fell apart after a military coup by Syrian officers in Damascus.[191] This was a blow to Pan-Arab ideology and ruined the political careers of several influential figures. Akram Hawrani's influence among the peasant class, for example, was such by this time that he could have risen to political leadership himself, had he not associated too closely with the officers who orchestrated the secession from the UAR.[192] In addition, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar suffered from the ideological fallout from the failure of the UAR.[193] The Military Committee however, avoided any association with the perpetrators of this 'reactionary' separatist coup, which moreover, precipitated another purge of Sunni officers.[194] The way was now clear for the Military Committee to assume a dominant role in Syrian politics by manoeuvring themselves into influential positions in both the military and the Ba'ath Party.

---

[188] Malcolm Kerr, 'Hafiz Asad and the Changing Patterns of Syrian Politics,' *International Journal*, Vol.28, No.3, Summer 1973,p.693; Tejel, 2009, p. 134.

[189] Winckler, 2009, p. 34.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Oron Yitzhak, ed. *Middle East Record*, Vol.2 (Jerusalem: Tel Aviv University, 1961), pp. 160-161.

[192] Seale, 1988, p. 68.

[193] Ibid.

[194] Seymour, 1970, pp. 35-36.

The Ba'ath coup, which came on March 8, 1963, realized the social revolution that would benefit the situation of the Alawites. The urban Sunni aristocrats were jettisoned from positions of power, and the peasant classes, including the Alawites, became politically enfranchised. At first the civilian ideologues of the Ba'ath and a Sunni officer, Amin al-Hafiz, remained as the frontage of the Ba'athist revolution, but the Alawite officers, Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad, increasingly pulled the levers of power,[195] through their influence in the heavily Alawite military units.[196] These two leaders both held potential to establish their dominance over the Alawite community. Whether or not Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya was ripe for activation is another question.

What Alawites desired was equal integration as citizens of the Syrian state. The means of achieving this goal, however, worked against this realisation. Common goals and social status caused Alawites to increasingly work together as a sect. In this vein, Hanna Batatu observed the close cooperation of rural groups and religious minorities in the 1960s:

> In Syria [...] disadvantaged or previously disadvantaged rural [...] people – representing a level in social evolution different than that of relatively long established urban groups – tend in their political actions to adhere to or cooperate more markedly with kinsmen or members of their own clan or people from their own sect, or region, this is not so much a manifestation of narrow cliquishness, although their behaviour bears this aspect, as it is they are really acting in a natural manner, merely obeying, so to say, the logic of their fundamental structural situation.[197]

---

[195] Kerr, 1973, p. 694; Martin Seymour, 1970, p. 37.

[196] "A study of the composition of Syrian army units in 1964 discloses that the proportion of Alawites in individual brigades ran from 20 percent to as much as 100 percent," Martin Seymour, 1970, p. 40.

[197] Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), p. 344.

According to Batatu's explanation, the Alawites were not actively seeking sectarian domination, but rather he observed a tendency for members of rural, less 'developed' communities to cooperate more than members of urban, more 'developed' communities.[198] This tendency could be based on the different characteristics of rural village life. Perhaps, it was the unfamiliarity of the cities and their lack of awareness of other groups due to their previous isolation.[199] Or maybe, it was the insecurity of being from a religious minority that caused Alawites to cooperate together. In any case, from a political standpoint, the end result was the same: common association by members of a particular community. Opposing groups viewed this as deliberate and concerted action and therefore responded in kind.

This process of mutual distrust descending into sectarianism is illustrated by Nikolaos van Dam's analysis of Ba'ath Party documents on the Party's crisis in 1966, which detailed some conversations amongst Sunnis from Hama:

> An evening gathering was held at the house of Captain 'Abd al-Jawad. There was varied conversation, which included the following: "The wife of Lieutenant Ghassan Hamawi spoke about the bloc formation of the Alawis. She told what she knew of Alawi women forming blocs in the House for female teachers during their studies [...] Either 'Abd al-Jawad or Ghassan Hamawi said that the Alawis were trying to dominate the Army and that this made it necessary to form an opposing bloc.'[200]

---

[198] Rural Sunnis could also be included in Batatu's definition; however, rural based religious minorities were even more reliant on each other based on their sectarian insecurity.

[199] Olsson T. Ozdalga E. & Raudvere, C. (eds.) *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, Papers read at a conference Held at the Swedish Institute in Istanbul, November, 1996, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, Trans. Vol.8, 1998, p. 181.

[200] Extract from a translation of *al-Taqrir al-Watha'iqi li-Azmat al-Hizb* (The Documentary Report on the Party's Crisis) pp.88-93, Appendix B. Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1979, p. 110.

> Captain 'Abd al-Jawad: I told him [Sergeant Muhammad Hassun] to pay attention to the meetings of Alawis and started a conversation with him on the subject of Alawi bloc formation. I did the same with Lieutenant Ghassan Hamawi and others and he told me, "I have started to appoint security men on the basis of their being Sunnis [...]"[201]

These two extracts reveal the paranoia of Sunnis about the activities of Alawites, and not just in the military sphere, as indicated by the comment about the female Alawite trainee teachers. It is quite possible that Alawite students congregated together for innocent reasons like those suggested by Batatu above. As it was, tales such as these seemed to validate Sunni fears of an Alawite 'takeover,' mainly through the army, which of course, was where many Alawites were employed. The inverse of Sunni suspicion was that Alawites felt more alienated and therefore relied on one another to an even greater extent. Even if sectarianism had little to do with Alawite representation in the political convulsions of the 1960s, it was understandable that Sunnis suspected otherwise and accused the Ba'ath regime of Alawite sectarianism. As van Dam has shown, this only served to strengthen the Alawite grip on the centres of power.[202]

Batatu's observation about the relative cohesion of rural and urban groups provides a new perspective of Ibn Khaldun's hypothesis that only rural tribes possess the necessary 'asabiyya to form a state or dynasty. The process described here bears some important differences from Ibn Khaldun's original formulation of the 'asabiyya concept. The Alawite political rise was not an overt and deliberate mobilisation of a group's capability to capture a state, it was a chain of events which, while seemingly accidental, were possibly unavoidable due to the structural features of the state and the historic relations of the communities contained within it - in particular, mutual suspicion and insecurity. Taking into

---

[201] Ibid. p. 113.

[202] Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B Taurus, 1996), p. 139.

account Batatu's explanation of how rural minorities mutually support one another and Van Dam's illustration of how suspected sectarianism leads to actual sectarianism, a picture begins to emerge of the process of coalescing Alawite sectarian ʻasabiyya.

The Rise of a Dominant Alawite Leader

In 1966 the pretence of Sunni and civilian control of the Ba'ath was dispensed with in another coup. Amin al-Hafiz was deposed and Salah al-Din al-Bitar and Michel Aflaq fled the country.[203] The Alawite officers, Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad, stood alone at the summit of Syrian politics, their power ensured by Alawites entrenched in the ranks of the most strategically vital units.[204] Initially it was Salah Jadid who took the lead role while the more cautious Hafiz al-Asad remained active in military and security affairs.[205] Salah Jadid never assumed direct leadership of the state however; instead pulling the levers of power from behind the scenes while a doctor named Nureddin al-Atassi was made President and official head of state.

Salah Jadid (1926-1993) was from a high ranking Haddadin family from the mountain village of Duwayr Baʻabda, around twenty kilometres south of Asad's home town, Qurdaha.[206] According to Patrick Seale, he was "clever, high minded and pronounced in his left wing views."[207] His political preferences had at first been toward the SSNP, but after he received assistance in his military career from Akram Hawrani, he switched to the Ba'ath Party.[208] As an Alawite leader Jadid

---

[203] Gordon H. Torrey, 'The Ba'th: Ideology and Practice,' Middle *East Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1969), p.468; The final insult to the founders of the Ba'ath Party perhaps came when Michel Aflaq's memorial in Baghdad was converted into a shopping mall for US soldiers, *Reuters*, Baghdad, September, 20 2009, 'Aflaq, symbol of Iraq and Syria's shared past,' http://blogs.reuters.com/global/2009/09/20/aflaq-symbol-of-iraq-and-syrias-shared-past/

[204] Seymour, 1970, p. 40.

[205] Van Dam, 1996, pp. 62-74.

[206] Ibid. p. 175, n. 69.

[207] Seale, 1988, p. 63.

[208] Ibid. p. 63.

was more qualified than Asad, his family held a far higher status,[209] and the larger Haddadin confederation was traditionally more influential than the Kalbiyya.[210] Moreover, he made powerful external allies, something that no previous Alawite leader had managed.

In 1966 the Soviet Union and East Germany were encouraged by the socialist bent of the new Syrian regime and eagerly assumed the supporting role the United States had declined in 1946. They began financing major infrastructure, such as the Euphrates Dam, and continued to supply arms for the Syrian military.[211] The support of an external superpower would assist in stabilising the Syrian political scene and entrench the position of whoever could seize power.

It is evident from the literature published at this time that the emergence of Alawites into powerful roles came as a surprise to observers of Syrian politics.[212] The key players in this ascent had kept a low profile right up until the moment that conditions were right to emerge from behind the scenes. Salah Jadid preferred to keep a low profile as he set about implementing his radical socialist reforms,[213] and foreign policy measures between 1966 and 1970.[214] While these policies alienated large sectors of the Syrian population, notably the Sunni urban bourgeoisie, they had real and tangible benefits for the Alawites who, almost without exception, occupied the poorest and most disadvantaged sectors of society. Jadid's policies, however, threatened to undermine Alawite gains in the long term, as they provoked strong reactions from Syria's neighbours along with

---

[209] His father was the commissioner of the Banyas district and his grandfather was one of the tribal leaders of the Haddadin tribal confederation, Van Dam, 1996, p. 175, n. 69.

[210] Seale, 1988, p. 63.

[211] Martin Seymour, 1970, pp.41-42; Massimiliano Trentin, 'Modernization as State Building: The Two Germanies in Syria, 1963–1972,' *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 33, No. 3, June 2009, p. 493.

[212] For example see, Eliezer Be'eri, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society* (New York, Praeger, 1969), p.160.

[213] Kerr, 1973, pp. 694-695.

[214] Trentin, 2009, pp. 492-493; Seymour, 1970, p. 39.

large sections of Syria's population.[215] In 1968 Hafiz al-Asad broke ranks with Jadid. Pragmatically recognising the danger posed by Jadid's policies, Asad moved to secure the loyalties of the important military units. By February 1969 Asad had succeeded in this task and was in a position to move against his rival for leadership of Alawite 'asabiyya.[216]

In September 1970, the showdown came and Salah Jadid was deposed following his ill advised military expedition into Jordan in support of the Palestinians.[217] Hafiz al-Asad was now in sole control of Alawite 'asabiyya. He enjoyed the full support of Syria's military which was by then almost entirely dominated by Alawites in most of the key positions. The conditions were ripe for the establishment of the Asad dynasty.

Overview

The period 1830-1970 saw the geopolitical division of the Levant altered radically. The decline of the Ottoman Empire opened opportunities for Alawite individuals and families to begin exploiting tribal and sectarian 'asabiyya for political ends. The exploits of Ismail Khayr Bey, and Suleiman Murshid gave a glimpse of what could occur given the right conditions. After the Ottoman collapse and the twenty-eight years of French involvement, a situation arrived where a group with a high level of 'asabiyya and a leader capable of establishing dominance could strongly influence the country's political direction. Starting around 1920, Alawites began descending the mountain seeking social advancement either through education, political parties such as the SSNP and Ba'ath, or employment in the army. Through this process, and the persistence of Sunni chauvinism, their common identity and interests relative to the Sunni majority became apparent.

---

[215] Kerr, 1973, p. 696.

[216] See Hanna Batatu, 'Syria's Muslim Brethren,' *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), p. 19; Trentin, 2009, p. 494; Gordon H.Torrey, 'The Ba'th: Ideology and Practice,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 445-470, p. 469.

[217] Kerr, 1973, pp. 698-699.

This began to diminish the importance of limited tribal identities and increased the significance of a broader Alawite sectarian identity, or ʻasabiyya.

This raises an interesting point. The entrance of independent Syria into the modern state system saw a descent into sectarian insecurity between communities, which led to [re]commencement of Khaldunian politics. An individual who commanded "superiority" within a group possessed of high levels of ʻasabiyya had a distinct political advantage.[218] Thus, if sectarian insecurity was the main factor for the development of high levels of ʻasabiyya among the Alawites, would it be logical to suggest that keeping a group insecure would help maintain its ʻasabiyya? This could prove a significant political asset to a ruler and circumvent Ibn Khaldun's ʻinevitable decline of group ʻasabiyya after the establishment of royal authority.' [219] Questioning how and why a group's insecurity is preserved will, therefore, shed more light on the politics of sectarian insecurity and the entrenchment of authoritarianism.

In independent Syria, it was the strong sectarian ʻasabiyya of the Alawites set against the weak ʻasabiyya of the Sunni Arabs that proved decisive. Although Arab (and Syrian) nationalism presented an opportunity to integrate with the majority in the first decades of Syrian independence, the reality of political integration with the, mostly Sunni, Arab nation was unnerving to the long persecuted Alawites. At the Syrian national level, Alawite insecurity, Sunni chauvinism and mutual suspicion caused a slide towards sectarianism, even as most parties strove to establish secular systems of government.

Thus, at the beginning of the 1970s, almost nine hundred years since the last Alawites fled to the mountains ahead of the Seljuk Turks, an Alawite was at the helm of the new Syrian state. But were Alawites finally in a position to openly dictate the political trajectory of the state to the benefit of their security and interests? Would the regime erected by Hafiz al-Asad actually benefit the long

---

[218] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 108.

[219] Ashworth, 2007,p. 47.

term social and political situation of Alawites? And how would the Asad dynasty, in its first stage, maintain this Alawite support?

Chapter Five

The Maintenance of Alawite ʻAsabiyya for the Asad Dynasty 1970 – 2000

According to Ibn Khaldun, when a group has a strong leader and a high level of ʻasabiyya relative to other groups, the political conditions exist for a dynasty or state to arise out of that group. Once formed however, the ʻasabiyya that brought a dynasty to power begins to erode gradually through such factors as urbanisation, luxury, decadence and corruption, resulting in the eventual emergence of a vigorous new dynasty with superior ʻasabiyya to displace the senile dynasty. Hence if luxury and decadence were largely absent, urbanisation was only partial, the most blatant corruption was hidden and sectarian rather than just tribal ʻasabiyya was present, would a dynasty be able to uphold the level of ʻasabiyya critical to its long term survival?

In terms of the historic development of Alawite sectarian ʻasabiyya and the subsequent capture of power by Hafiz al-Asad, it seems that Ibn Khaldun does provide a cogent explanation for Alawite political history, but did Alawite ʻasabiyya actually then begin to decline towards an inevitable demise of Asad rule? What factors could allow for the preservation of high levels of Alawite ʻasabiyya? Also, according to the Khaldunian variables for the success of a dynasty, the small size of the Alawite community relative to the Sunni Arab majority, combined with the demographic diversity of the Syrian lands, posed challenges for the consolidation of Hafiz al-Asad's rule. He would require the broad support of the previously divided Alawite community; a necessity that Asad seemed to understand. Ultimately, sectarian insecurity remained a primary

factor in the maintenance of Alawite 'asabiyya even though they supposedly became the 'dominant minority' in Syria.[1]

The thirty year period following Hafiz al-Asad's ascension to power was an unprecedented time in Alawite history, they were effectively 'catapulted' from obscurity into the middle of Syrian and Middle Eastern politics.[2] Ironically, the Alawite community became increasingly opaque to outside observers over the course of Hafiz al-Asad's rule. This can partly be put down to policies of the regime, which actively discouraged sectarian discourse,[3] but also to the fact that Hafiz al-Asad himself became the focus of international scrutiny as far as Syria was concerned. The Alawite community was however, the critical axis upon which swung the fortunes of the Asad dynasty and ultimately the Syrian state.

The stability experienced by Syria after the consolidation of Asad rule has been attributed by Syria scholar Raymond Hinnebusch to social, political and economic processes that broadened the regime's power base beyond the Alawite community.[4] This appraisal is accurate to the extent that Hafiz al-Asad successfully incorporated non-Alawite elements into his power structure, such as rural Sunnis, other religious minorities[5] and segments of the Sunni merchant class (in Damascus especially).[6] It cannot be ignored however, that the Alawite community remained the 'keystone' of this power structure.[7]

---

[1] See for example, Faksh, Mahmud, A. 'The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.20, No.2 (April 1984), pp. 133-153.

[2] I. Rabinovitch, *The View from Damascus* (Edgware & Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2008), p. 227

[3] Tejel, 2009, p. 64.

[4] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria*: *Army, Party, and Peasant* (Boulder: Westview, 1990).

[5] Watenpaugh, 2006, p. 300.

[6] Tejel, 2009, p. 58.

[7] Andrew Rathnell used the term 'keystone' to describe the importance of the Syrian Intelligence Services (Mukhabarat) to the Asad regime, see A. Rathnell, 'Syria's Intelligence Services: Origins and Development,' *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. 16, No.2, (1996).

According to Ibn Khaldun:

> A ruler can achieve power only with the help of his own people. They are his group and his helpers in his enterprise. He uses them to fight against those who revolt against his dynasty. It is they with whom he fills the administrative offices, who, he appoints as wazirs and tax collectors. They help him to achieve superiority…[8]

Hafiz al-Asad mobilised Alawites along these lines and used them to staff important posts in the government and security forces. Ultimately, it was the Alawites that allowed Hafiz al-Asad to achieve 'superiority.' If Alawite support fell away from the Asad regime, it would certainly not have survived the period of active opposition between 1976 and 1982. Moreover, the stability of Syria beyond 1982 was largely a result of the brutal example that was made of regime opponents using Alawite troops, and the omnipresent surveillance of the population by Alawites in the intelligence agencies (*Mukhabarat*). Yet despite the fact that Alawites underpinned the stability of the Asad regime, this still did not make it an Alawite regime.

Although Alawites like Salah Jadid had already wielded political power from behind the scenes, it was not until the 1970s that the Syrian Ba'athist regime widely came to be viewed as an 'Alawite regime.' The inauguration of Hafiz al-Asad as president prompted Sunni suspicions that the Alawites had usurped power. Three key factors contributed to a belief by many Syrians, that the Asad regime was biased toward Alawites: the drafting of a new Syrian constitution in 1973, which neglected to specify that the President be a Muslim; the placement of Alawites into important roles in the military and government; and nepotism toward relatives, such as Hafiz al-Asad's brother Rifa'at, whose open excesses produced widespread antipathy toward the regime. Conversely, from Alawite

[8] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, p.146.

perspectives, Sunni reaction to the new constitution and sectarian violence between 1976 and 1982 fed feelings of insecurity about continued religious chauvinism by Sunni Muslims.

In reality, it was not an Alawite regime with expressly sectarian goals. The Asad regime needed the Alawites as its only reliable support, and Alawites felt they required Asad regime survival to avoid a return to their inferior social status, or worse, a violent Sunni backlash. As will be explained, the sect became deadlocked in a 'Faustian' relationship with the Asad regime at Hama in February 1982. Consequently, Alawite aspirations for full and sustainable emancipation in Syrian society were left unfulfilled.

In theory, Asad rule represented the long term opportunity to direct the core identity of Syria towards Syrianism, Arabism, or a more inclusive broad based Islam, all of which could assist Alawite political status,[9] yet Alawite sectarian minority status was solidified during this period. This is shown by their continued apprehension about the majority Sunni Arabs, and consequent reluctance to move out of alignment with the Asad regime, which only strengthened the Asad dynasty's hold on power. Did having members of their community in power impact favourably or negatively on Alawite political standing and security? As already shown in the previous chapter, when Alawites overstepped the bounds of Sunni Muslim toleration the repercussions were often severe for the group in general. In the context of Alawite history, the period 1970-2000 went far beyond anything that had occurred previously in terms of Alawites going out on a political limb.

[9] Tejel, 2009, p. 83, suggests that the Syrian regime became "capable of shaping the whole Syrian society;" Chiffoleau, 2006, p. 10, said that it was time for Syrian society to "emerge unified and cleansed of its ethnic denominational, social, and clannish blemishes."

An Alawite Rules in Damascus 1971-1976

At the beginning of the 1970s the Alawite situation was seemingly better than any previous period in the sect's history, including the Hamdanid period. Secular and socialist policies, adopted by the Ba'ath regime during the 1960s, were socio-economically advantageous for Alawites. Alawite security was buttressed by their dominant position in the armed forces and by having one of their own occupying the presidential palace in Damascus. Syria had the Soviet Union as a superpower sponsor to buttress regime stability. Even the Sunni urban bourgeoisie seemed positive about the political situation, as they initially welcomed Hafiz al-Asad's relaxation of the radical economic reforms imposed by Salah Jadid.[10] In this political atmosphere Alawites could understandably have felt some optimism about their future prospects.

The Syrian Alawite population in 1970 was approximately 690,000,[11] eleven percent of the Syrian population of 6,305,000, an increase from 10.6 percent in 1960.[12] This represented a positive shift in Alawite demography reversing their declining proportion in the first decades of Syrian independence. This could have been due to improved living conditions for rural populations under Ba'athist rule. Another factor was the large scale emigration of mainly Sunni, urban professionals and businessmen from the late 1950s due to socialist reforms.[13] In 1970, Alawites remained mostly rural and a majority in the Latakia and Tartous coastal districts,[14] but Alawite migration to the cities increased during the period

---

[10] Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1988), p. 317.

[11] D. Gubser, "Minorities in Power: The Alawites of Syria," in R.D. Mclaurin, (ed.) *The Political Role of Minority Groups in The Middle East*, (New York: Greenwood, 1979), pp. 17-18.

[12] Onn Winckler, *Arab Political Demography: Population Growth, Labor Migration and Natalist Policies*, 2nd ed. (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), p. 34.

[13] Ibid. pp. 33-34.

[14] Tord Olsson, 'The Gnosis of Mountaineers and Townspeople: The Religion of the Syrian Alawites, or the Nusairis.' In T. Olsson (ed.) *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, Papers read at a conference Held at the Swedish Institute in Istanbul, November, 1996, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul Trans. Vol. 8, 1998, p. 168.

of Asad rule.[15] The demographic of Latakia especially, changed dramatically in the 1970s, as Alawites moved into the town seeking better opportunities. The Latakia Sunnis, formerly the majority, became a minority with the Christians.

The flow of Alawites to Damascus continued as well. The Sunnis (and Christians), long established in Damascus, however, maintained their preeminent position in the *Souq* (market place). Hafiz al-Asad staffed a majority of the government and security departments, important to regime maintenance, with more 'reliable' Alawites.[16] For Alawites, the best opportunity for stable income was the Army, the Mukhabarat (security agencies) and the large bureaucracy. Hence, there was a sectarian basis to the division of labour, with the Sunnis in the traditional private economic sector and Alawites occupying much of the public sector. While it seemed that the Alawites were finally becoming emancipated in the Syrian state, in reality it was a contrived situation.

The historic alienation of the Alawites from the majority of Syrian society continued. Now, rather than being viewed as despised, heretical and rustic 'mountain men,' the Alawites were the threatening soldiers, or Mukhabarat, on the street corners and the 'faceless' bureaucrats in government departments. Moreover, the autochthonous Damascenes, Aleppans or Latakians for that matter, did not want these 'inferior' Alawites (or the other rural minorities) in their proud 'Islamic' cities.[17] Even so, the continuation of sectarianism in Syrian politics into the 1970s was not necessarily a situation that any of the communities wanted. Alawites would certainly have preferred for sectarianism to recede as a political factor. This was, after all, the basis of their attraction to the Ba'ath party and secularism in general.

---

[15] Winckler, 2009, p. 62.

[16] Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), p. 332.

[17] Christa Salamandra, 'Consuming Damascus: Public Culture and the Construction of Social Identity,' in W. Armbrust (ed.) *Mass Mediations, New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 329-336.

If Alawite goals had originally been based on achieving social and political emancipation in the Syrian state, did the leading Alawite individual share this aspiration, and was it his goal to help his co-sectarians achieve it? How should Hafiz al-Asad be defined? Hafiz al-Asad was according to Henry Kissinger, an extremely shrewd and pragmatic purveyor of political strategy.[18] It can be concluded however, that he was not so pragmatic that he was devoid of idealism. Both Asad and Salah Jadid shared similar ideals of secular socio-economic political reform that would benefit disadvantaged groups like the Alawites.[19] Although Asad's more pragmatic approach saw him emerge as the victor in the contest with Jadid, this does not mean that he abandoned his ideals. Instead, he pursued a different path to their attainment.

Middle East scholar Daniel Pipes posed the question whether Alawites like Hafiz al-Asad were primarily motivated by ideology, ambition or sectarianism; however, this mistakenly assumes that these factors are separable.[20] A better perspective is to see these factors as intertwined. Abd al-Halim Khaddam, a Sunni from Banyas and a friend and colleague of Asad in the Ba'ath cadres from Latakia since 1946, provided a well measured insight into the different elements of Hafiz al-Asad's mindset:

> Hafiz al-Asad was [...] like a structure, he had different sides. One of his sides was the *pragmatic side*, if you look at it that way, you can say he was pragmatic. From another side you can see that he was an *idealist*. One side you can say that his personality – you can see that he was a very decent person. But from his other side, the fourth side of the structure he was very... in the way he let his family control the power... he started *corruption* [...] for his family. It [...] opposes his idealistic side, and his pragmatic side. So he had all these sides to him. He was

[18] Edward R.F. Sheehan, 'How Kissinger Did It: Step by Step in the Middle East,' *Foreign Policy*, No. 22 (Spring, 1976), p. 42.

[19] Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I.B Taurus, 1996), pp. 137-138.

[20] Daniel Pipes poses this question and suggests that sect is the most important element in Syrian politics; see D. Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), p.446.

> able of course to talk about people and the welfare of people and his beliefs – how he's going to help people. At the same time he was [allowing] his inner circle to become more powerful, run the country through corruption and through military control. And [on] one side he was very nationalistic, he didn't really care about that he was from a minority group, he thought that everyone was equal. But again there was something about him that always – on the other side – *supported his minority*.[21]

According to Khaddam, Hafiz al-Asad had conflicting pragmatic, idealist, corrupt and sectarian sides to his personality. This description supports the idea that Hafiz al-Asad's intentions and goals cannot be explained by any one factor. Asad had a genuine secular ideology, which he attempted to apply to Syrian politics through a pragmatic approach, yet it cannot be ignored that he supported his minority in a way that can only be described as a type of sectarianism. While his secular ideology opposed sectarian particularism, it was only by mobilising the sectarian 'asabiyya of his community or as Ibn Khaldun wrote "...with the help of his own people..." that he could gain a stable political platform, in the turbulent arena of Syrian politics.[22]

Abd al-Halim Khaddam raises another crucial point about the 'corrupt' role of Hafiz al-Asad's family. Khaddam had good reason to be disappointed at Hafiz al-Asad granting political power to his family members. As Syrian vice-president and the most experienced and capable politician below Asad, he could well have expected to be elevated to the presidency himself.[23] As it happened, members of Hafiz al-Asad's family increasingly played crucial roles in the regime, especially during and after the difficult years 1976 to 1982.[24] This was especially so of Asad's

[21] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, Paris, September, 2009, (emphasis added).

[22] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 146

[23] Judge Detlev Mehlis commented on the 'statesman like' qualities of Abd al-Halim Khaddam: Interview with the author, Dunedin, May 2009.

[24] Seale, 1988, p. 286.

brother Rifa'at, who was "let off the leash" in order to save the regime at its most perilous moment in February 1982.[25] The excesses of members of Hafiz al-Asad's family would have implications for the wider Alawite community as they became associated with general perceptions about the nature of 'Alawite rule.'

A quite different perspective of the Hafiz al-Asad comes from the Alawite Shaykh, Nasir Eskiocak:

> I remember before Hafiz al-Asad, in Syria, every six months there was a military coup. [26] They [Syrians] used to harm themselves, they used to fight, and they used to jail each other. When Hafiz al-Asad took the power Syria was held stable by him for thirty years. He was taking care of Syria and its rights. On one hand he ruled in a very dictatorial way but fair; he had dictatorial power, but fair and with justice. [...] Hafiz al-Asad [...] didn't use tyranny, he used equality and rights and the Syrian people were so satisfied with him that they replaced him with his son Bashar al-Asad. [He was] a conciliatory ruler who helped conciliate [...] with righteousness and equality.[27]

The key element to take from this definition of Hafiz al-Asad is the emphasis on equality, justice and conciliation. This view may seem incompatible with commonly held estimations of Asad's iron fisted and repressive rule, however, from Alawite perspectives, after hundreds of years of political inequality and sectarian discrimination by Sunni Muslim overlords, Hafiz al-Asad's rule would have seemed like the epitome of egalitarianism; a situation which Alawites would fight to defend.

In the early stages of Hafiz al-Asad's rule it appeared that Syrians, in general, accepted the fact of his presidency. This was, perhaps, seen by Alawites

---

[25] Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 237.

[26] This is of course an exaggeration designed to make a point about the political volatility which existed prior to Hafiz al-Asad's capture of power in 1970.

[27] Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, interview with the author, Antakya, March 29, 2011.

as an indication of a burgeoning Syrian nationalism, which transcended sectarianism. Asad's initial popularity seemed a far cry from previous examples of Alawite rule over populations including Sunni Muslims, for instance, Ismail Khayr Bey was never accepted by Sunni Arabs, Mahmud Pasha was quickly assassinated and the representative council of the Alawite state was hampered by Sunni opposition. Hafiz al-Asad, however, aided his cause by investing a lot of money trying to win over the religious establishment, particularly in Damascus, with donations and generous endowments.[28] But mostly, after two decades of extreme political volatility, most Syrians desired stability, something that Hafiz al-Asad appeared capable of delivering.

In 1973 the publication of the first permanent Syrian constitution since 1961 provided a 'litmus test' of Alawite status in the new era.[29] Prior to Asad's ascension to the presidency it was taken for granted in most quarters that the president, even if only in a 'puppet' role, be Sunni Muslim.[30] Asad's assumption of the powers of the presidency on February 22, 1971 contravened this general rule. Moreover, the initial version of the new constitution published in January 1973 neglected to stipulate that the President need be Muslim at all.[31] It is difficult to believe that this was an oversight by Asad, who sought to (quietly) demote the role of religion in a new secular Syria. For Alawites, not to mention Christians and other minorities, majority acceptance of the new constitution would show that religious obstacles to their full political emancipation were a thing of the past and that secularism had taken root in Syria. The mass protests that ensued across the country proved that this was not the case.[32]

---

[28] Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria* (New York: I.B. Taurus), pp. 139-140.

[29] 'Syria Say Charter wins 97.6 percent of Vote,' *New York Times*, March 14, 1973.

[30] 'Militant Syrian Leader: Nureddin al-Atassi,' *New York Times*, September 23, 1970.

[31] Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2010, p. 189.

[32] Alasdair Drysdale, 'The Asad Regime and Its Troubles,' *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), p. 8.

Demonstrations occurred in Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and in Damascus religious leaders circulated a demand that Islam be declared the religion of the state. In Hama, government troops and demonstrators clashed, resulting in sixty killed or wounded.[33] These events proved that religion remained of extreme importance in Ba'athist Syria and, moreover, it became quite clear that the Sunni majority was acutely aware of Asad's 'problematic' religious credentials. Hafiz al-Asad quickly backtracked and included in an amendment to the original draft that "the religion of the President of the Republic has to be Islam."[34] This was a turning point for Alawites. While undercurrents of sectarianism began emerging in the 1960s, the general trajectory of the community had appeared to be towards their eventual equal integration in Syria. The Sunni rejection of the new constitution, mandating a secular state without religious discrimination, was perceived as a profound rejection by the Alawites, which rekindled their insecurity.

The Sunni protests firmed Alawite dependence on Hafez al-Asad who retaliated on behalf of the minorities: "true Islam should not be narrow-mindedness and awful extremism, as Islam is a religion of love, progress, social justice and equality."[35] This language touched on the very core of Alawite concerns about their place in Syria. This was evident in the views of the Alawite shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, who described Asad as "a conciliatory ruler who helped conciliate [...] with righteousness and equality."[36]

Questions about whether Alawites were Muslim or not became of extreme importance, not only for the legitimacy of Asad's presidency, but also for the security of the Alawites. Hafiz al-Asad's close ally and Sunni Muslim, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, suggests that "[In] the Syrian constitution, the president has to

---

[33] Juan de Onis, 'Religious freedom in charter said to stir Syrian disorders,' *New York Times*, February 25, 1973.

[34] *New York Times*, March 14, 1973; *Syrian Arab Republic Constitution*, adopted March 13, 1973: Chp. 1 article 3(1): "The religion of the President of the Republic has to be Islam."

[35] Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, New York: I.B. Taurus, p.140.

[36] Interview with the author.

be Muslim, not Sunni Muslim or Alawi Muslim."[37] He implies therefore, that there is no question over the Muslim credentials of Alawites. Unfortunately for the Alawites and the popular legitimacy of Asad's regime, many Syrians did not share Khaddam's outlook in the early 1970s. Further proof of the Islamic basis of the Alawite religion was required. Here the Alawites received assistance from a source from which they had been disconnected from for many centuries, the Twelver Shi'a.

Ayatollah Hasan Mahdi al-Shirazi (d.1980) was a prominent Iraqi Shi'ite cleric who was expelled from Iraq in 1969/1970.[38] After resettling in Beirut, he spent considerable time in the Alawite regions of Syria and Lebanon and developed close relations with Hafiz al-Asad. In December 1972, al-Shirazi issued a *fatwa* that stated: "I found them [the Alawites] – as I expected – to be Shi'a of *ahl al Bayt* [the house of the Prophet] who are loyal and totally committed to the truth." [39] This statement seems to conflict with Israeli scholar Yvette Talhamy's observation that al-Shirazi spent considerable time and effort trying to convert Alawites to Shi'ism.[40] It seems that al-Shirazi's *fatwa* had more to do with a mutually beneficial political alliance with Hafiz al-Asad, involving much needed Islamic buttressing for the new president, in return for Syrian protection to the exiled cleric.[41] As it was, al-Shirazi was assassinated in Beirut in 1980, most likely by Iraqi Ba'ath agents.[42]

Despite the endorsements of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husayni, and Ayatollah al-Shirazi, regarding the Islamic character of the Alawites, the bulk of Syrian Sunnis remained sceptical. The Muslim Brotherhood opposition worked

---

[37] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, Paris, September, 2009.

[38] E. Sivan, & M. Friedman, *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p.97; Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vo.46, No. 2, 2010, p. 188.

[39] Talhamy, 2010, p. 188.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Talhamy, 2010, p. 188.

[42] Sivan and Friedman, 1990, p. 97.

hard to promote this scepticism in the early 1970s. After the constitution related riots however, Alawites received support from another Shi'ite Imam, Musa al-Sadr, who declared the Alawites' doctrinal unity with the Shi'a,[43] and in July 1973 stated: "Today those Muslims called Alawis are the brothers of the Shi'a... we will not allow anyone to condemn this generous creed."[44]

The return of Shi'ite support to the Alawites in the 1970s came after a long hiatus. This was partially due to the political marginality of the Shi'ites themselves. Up until the 1970s Shi'ites carried very little political or religious weight in the Arab world. Shi'a populations in Iraq and the Gulf were politically repressed under authoritarian Sunni regimes. The closest Shi'a community of any size resided in Lebanon. In the period between their persecution by the Mamluks around 1305/1307, and their political awakening in the 1970s,[45] the Lebanese Shi'a faced socio-economic and political disabilities similar to those of the Alawites.[46] By the 1970s, the consociational communal political structure of Lebanon meant that the Shi'ite population had begun to assume political relevance.[47] Musa al-Sadr played a key role in the mobilisation of the Lebanese Shi'ites, who would come to be important and reliable allies for the Asad regime and the Alawites. Ironically, if Alawites were genuinely accepted as orthodox Shi'a Muslims, this could work to diminish Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya, as they would become more religiously acceptable and therefore, less reliant on the Asad dynasty.

Besides his religious defence of the Alawites, Musa al-Sadr provided vital early political support to Hafez al-Asad's regime, otherwise isolated in the Arab world.[48] Al-Sadr never failed to support the positions of the Asad regime between

---

[43] Batatu, 1999, p. 20.

[44] Talhamy, 2010, p. 190.

[45] Naomi Weinberger, *Syrian Intervention in Lebanon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 104.

[46] Kamal Dib, *Warlords and Merchants* (Reading: Ithaca, 2004), p. 251.

[47] Weinberger, 1986, pp. 102-103.

[48] Although Hafiz al-Asad began remedying this situation by moderating Syrian foreign policy, see: 'New Syrian Chief Realigns Party,' *New York Times*, November 17, 1970.

1972 and 1978, for example, he was the most enthusiastic advocate of the controversial "Damascus Agreement" of 1976 on Lebanon.[49] In addition, al-Sadr supported the Asad regime in its confrontation with Lebanese Druze politician Kamal Jumblatt,[50] issues concerning the Palestinians,[51] and most importantly, its physical intervention in Lebanon with 12,000 troops, in June 1976.[52] Imam Musa al-Sadr 'disappeared' on a trip to Libya in August 1978. It is assumed he was assassinated the same day he was due to meet with Colonel Qaddafi.[53]

Hafiz al-Asad was not a particularly religious individual,[54] therefore, it could be said that the adoption of an orthodox Shi'a religious identity for Alawites was really part of his pragmatic attempts to consolidate his own legitimacy. Many Alawites were initially not very enthusiastic about losing their separate identity and resented being lumped together with the Shi'a. This was particularly so amongst Lebanese Alawites, but also included some Syrian Alawite shaykhs.[55] In Lebanon opposition to the submergence of Alawite identity led to the formation of the Alawite Youth Movement (AYM), led by Ali Eid (b. 1940).[56]

According to his former teacher at the American University of Beirut, Elie Salem, 'Ali Eid was an excellent student as well as an affable and thoughtful individual, certainly not a radical.[57] He represented the new generation of

[49] Weinberger, 1986, p. 188.

[50] Ibid. p. 197.

[51] Ibid. p. 205.

[52] Ibid. pp. 207, 209.

[53] Reuvan Avi-Ran, *The Syrian Involvement in Lebanon Since 1975*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p.184, n.57; Tony Badran suggests that al-Sadr's ties to the Syrians and his deteriorating relations with the Palestinians cost him his life, see: 'Lebanon's Militia Wars,' in B. Rubin (ed.) *Conflict and Insurgency in the Contemporary Middle East* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 172.

[54] Abd al-Halim Khaddam suggested that Hafiz al-Asad's son, Bashar, "grew up in a very non-religious environment", Interview with this author. Also, Shaykh 'Ali Yeral explained that Hafiz al-Asad was not particularly knowledgeable in the Alawite religion, interview with this author, Antakya, March 28, 2011.

[55] Riad Yazbeck, 'Return of the Pink Panthers?' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.3, No.2 (August, 2008); Talhamy, 2010, pp. 189-190.

[56] Ibid; Talhamy, 2010, pp. 189-190.

[57] Elie Salem, interview with this author, Balamand, March 16, 2011; Salem is a former Lebanese Foreign minister and academic who is currently President of Balamand University in Lebanon.

educated Alawites who sought greater emancipation and open Alawite representation in Lebanese politics. In 1975 with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, and the entry of Syrian forces, the AYM would become the Arab Democratic Party (ADP). The armed branch of the party was called *Al-Fursan al-Hammur al-Arabi* (The Arab Red Knights), and was closely allied with Hafiz al-Asad's younger brother, Rifa'at.[58]

In 1973 a group of Alawite religious leaders in Syria issued a formal declaration that denied Alawite religious heterodoxy and proclaimed that the Alawites "followed the majority of Shi'a and whatever else was attributed to them consisted of lies fabricated by their enemies and the enemies of Islam."[59] If the reaction of some Alawites to Mamluk attempts in the early fourteenth century to channel them into religious orthodoxy is recalled, it is interesting that Alawites acquiesced so easily to having their particular creed publicly extinguished. In contrast to their inherent hostility for Sunni orthodoxy, however, Alawites have often aligned themselves with the Shi'a tradition, as is evident from their early history. Alawite sectarian apprehension, triggered by the strong reaction of Sunnis to the new Syrian constitution, led to a general application of taqiyya, which precluded the open discussion of Alawite particularism. In any case, from this time, open Alawite opposition to 'merging' their identity with the Shi'ites disappears.[60]

Between 1970 and 1972, Hafiz al-Asad consolidated his predominant position among the Alawite community and disposed of Alawite Ba'athists who did not align themselves with him.[61] Thereafter, a process is evident of Alawites falling into line behind the policies of the Asad regime and its political allies such as Musa al-Sadr. In short, there was a developing tendency for Alawites to let

---

[58] Riad Yazbeck, 2008, 'Return of the Pink Panthers?'

[59] Olsson, 1988, p. 180; see also Batatu 1999, p. 20.

[60] Riad Yazbeck, 2008, 'Return of the Pink Panthers?'; Talhamy, 2010, pp. 189-190.

[61] Tejel, 2009, p. 58.

Hafiz al-Asad speak and act, on their behalf, in effect placing the security of the community in his hands.

An early example of this occurred from April 1976 when the Syrian military intervened in Lebanon.[62] Explanations for Syria's entry into the Lebanese arena include Norvelle DeAtkine's conclusion that Hafiz al-Asad "considered it to be in the interest of his minority Alawite regime."[63] But was it beneficial for the Alawites? Bearing in mind the sectarian tensions simmering in Syria following their supposed 'hijacking' of power, Alawites must have viewed sectarian violence in Lebanon with some trepidation.

The sectarian animosities apparent in the Lebanese conflict no doubt sparked fears among Alawites of a "contagion" effect in Syria.[64] It may, therefore, have been the intention of the Asad regime to intervene in Lebanon in order to contain the situation and prevent an overflow into Syria. Other possible factors in Hafiz al-Asad's decision to intervene in Lebanon were the political threats posed by Lebanon, both as a refuge for political dissidents and as a model for multi-confessional democracy. Lebanon with its pluralist political structure had long provided space for political activism by exiles and dissidents from Syria's political struggles.[65] The turmoil in Lebanon provided an opportunity for Asad to silence criticism of his regime; for example, Khalil Brayez a former Syrian army captain and critic of Hafiz al-Asad since the 1967 war, was kidnapped in Lebanon and taken back to Syria.[66] The Asad regime also disliked the thought of the Palestinians achieving political autonomy, and dreaded the prospect of the Lebanese Christians embracing Israeli protection. Overall, Hafiz al-Asad needed to control Lebanon in order to buttress his rule in Syria.

---

[62] Batatu, 1999, p. 299.

[63] Norvelle DeAtkine, 'The Arab as insurgent and counterinsurgent,' in B. Rubin (ed.) *Conflict and Insurgency in the Contemporary Middle East* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 32.

[64] Weinberger, 1986, p. 81.

[65] Avi-Ran, 1991, p. 7.

[66] *The Times*, London, June 23, 1980.

The outcome for Alawites from the Syrian alignment with Lebanese Maronite Christians against Sunni Muslim Palestinians[67] was to help push subterranean tensions to the surface in Syria.[68] It seemed to prove for many Syrian Sunnis that the Asad regime was indeed antithetical to Muslim causes, and verified for many, the suspect religious loyalties of Alawites in general.[69]

Another aspect to the sectarian conflict in Lebanon, with its pluralist democratic system, was to provide the Syrian regime with a good argument about the benefits of authoritarian rule. Hannah Batatu notes how Lebanese politician Kamal Jumblatt sought the "democratic emancipation of an entire [Lebanese] people," including his own Druze community, which "gave the Asad regime the shivers."[70] Sectarian strife in Lebanon had the effect of keeping Alawite sectarian insecurity on edge, preventing any slippage of Alawite 'asabiyya. Ironically, what Syrian Alawites originally wanted was something similar to a functioning Lebanese political system, where they could preserve their separate identity but still be equal citizens, which would lead to a diminution of Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya for Asad rule.

In terms of pure strategic calculations, the most obvious threat to the Syrian regime was the Israelis. If the Israelis took advantage of a weak Lebanon they could outflank the Golan Heights via the Beka'a Valley, which would see them in close proximity to Damascus, the industrial centres of Homs and Hama,[71] and in striking distance of the Alawite heartland to the north. Overall, the nature of the Lebanese political scene with its vulnerability to external manipulation meant that if Syria did not assert its interests there, another power would.

---

[67] 'Lebanese Christian plea to Syria,' *The Times*, May 31, 1976; C.L. Sulzberger, 'Shifting Levantine Patterns,' *New York Times*, June 26, 1976.

[68] Alasdair Drysdale, 'The Asad Regime and Its Troubles,' *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), pp. 4-5; 'President Assad of Syria faces disquiet at home as troops are stretched across 300 miles,' *The Times*, London, June 16, 1976; Patrick Seale, 1988, pp. 283, 286.

[69] Batatu, 1999, p. 300.

[70] Batatu, 1999, p. 297.

[71] Avi-Ran, 1991, p.7.

One more side effect of Syrian intervention in Lebanon, in support of right-wing Christians, was a temporary warming of United States and French relations with the 'radical' Ba'athist regime in Syria. It was perhaps illustrative that Hafiz al-Asad went to Paris in 1976, his first visit to a Western country, while he postponed trips to Eastern Europe.[72] This was an early example of the political manoeuvring that would see Asad take the Alawites, as the support base of his regime, from local obscurity to international political relevance. By the mid 1970s Hafiz al-Asad was perceived internationally as a positive force for stability and progress in the Middle East region.[73] However, similarly to previous eras, real political opposition to the Alawites came, not from major powers but from the local Sunni Arab population.

The Muslim Brotherhood Assault on the Asad Dynasty

The first six years of Hafiz al-Asad rule saw initial Alawite hopes for genuine social and political integration in Syria gradually eroded by their continued social alienation, the constitution riots and the sectarian violence in Lebanon. The events to follow would however act to further galvanise the Alawites' dependence on the Asad regime.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, part of the wider Sunni Islamist organization that had originated in Egypt in 1928,[74] launched its "all-out struggle" against the Asad regime in February 1976.[75] The direct cause of their rising against the regime was a brutal crackdown on dissent in the city of Hama by elite forces under the command of Rifa'at al-Asad in February 1976.[76] The deeper causes of violent opposition to the Asad regime had, however, been building for some time.

---

[72] *New York Times*, June 26, 1976.

[73] Eric Pace, 'Adroit Syrian President, Hafiz al-Asad,' *New York Times*, May 10, 1977.

[74] For a discussion of the origins and ideology of the Syrian Muslim Brothers see: Itzchak Weismann, 'Sa'id Hawwa: The Making of a Radical Muslim Thinker in Modern Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), pp. 601-623; see also, Seale, 1988, p. 322.

[75] Weinberger, 1986, p. 79.

[76] Ibid. p. 79.

Discontent was fuelled by the secular constitution, economic dissatisfaction among Sunni merchants, Syrian regime involvement in Lebanon, and general resentment about Alawites 'usurping' a dominant role in Syria. Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer, Dr Umar Abdallah, revealed the sentiment behind the insurgency in his 1983 "partisan account," *The Islamic Struggle in Syria.*[77]

> […] it has always been the consensus of the Muslim *'ulama*, both Sunni and Shi'i that the Nusairis are *kuffar* (disbelievers, rejecters of faith) […] Furthermore nine or ten percent of the population cannot be allowed to dominate the majority because that is against the logic of things, and we are quite sure that the wise men of the sect agree with us that neither we nor they are obliged to support the empire of Hafiz and Rifa'at Asad. In our case, the sectarian war was not waged by the majority trying to protect itself against the minority. It is definitely the minority that forgot itself […][78]

This extract shows five key elements in the mentality of the insurgents. First, that the Muslim credentials of the Alawites remained in question. It seems that the *futya* of al-Husayni (1936), al-Shirazi (1972) and al-Sadr (1973) were disregarded. Secondly, the Alawite community was firmly associated with the Asad regime by the Muslim Brothers, which is indicated by the comment that nine or ten percent of the population should not dominate the majority. Third, that the Asads were viewed as a dynasty (empire), suggests that the official ideology of Ba'athism lent no legitimacy to the rulers. Fourthly, the admission that it was a 'sectarian war' reveals that in the minds of the Muslim Brothers it was a war between Sunnis and Alawites. Finally, and importantly, the comment that the 'minority forgot itself' recalls a chauvinistic attitude towards the Alawites who had stepped outside the bounds of Sunni toleration. Although Abdallah appeals

---

[77] Book Review, *Journal of Church and State*, Vol.26, No. 3, 1984, p. 548.

[78] Umar F. Abdallah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983), pp.48, 211, 1983; also cited in Rabinovitch, 2008, pp. 229-230.

to Alawites that they are 'not obliged to support' the Asads, such diatribes as these, would surely work only to strengthen Alawite support for the regime. To be labelled 'minority heretics,' who had 'forgotten themselves,' would fail to reassure ordinary Alawites that a post-Asad Syria would be favourable to their interests.

In the heart of the Alawite territory support to the regime was seemingly as strong as ever at the end of 1976. In Hafiz al-Asad's home town, Qurdaha, twenty kilometres south east of Latakia, the populace proudly watched "Uncle Hafiz" on television in situations like military processions, being hailed: "With our souls and with our blood we will sacrifice ourselves for you!"[79] The dissemination of information was, of course, tightly controlled by the government. Meanwhile, around the country political tensions were escalating. In Damascus government buildings were heavily guarded and there were public hangings of 'terrorists.' In Aleppo there were bombings and civil disturbances.[80]

By 1977 the Muslim Brothers were waging an assassination campaign against high ranking Alawites close to the regime. Victims were not confined to military personnel, such as Brigadier Hamid Razzouk and Colonel Ali Haidar, but also professionals such as Dr Mohammad al-Fahdel, the president of Damascus University.[81] Although the common feature was that the victims were Alawites, government sources were careful not to emphasise this aspect, choosing instead to blame these murders on the rival Ba'athist Iraqi regime.[82] No doubt Saddam Hussein would not have been displeased to see his Syrian Ba'athist rivals suffering such blows; however, there is little evidence to suggest he was directly behind the attacks. The Asad regime's reason for blaming Iraq was to avoid a portrayal of the conflict in sectarian terms, which would act against the secular

---

[79] James F. Clarity, 'Reporters Notebook: Syrians Are Served News In Confusing Portions, Well Spiced by Rumors,' *New York Times*, October 10, 1976.

[80] *New York Times*, October 10, 1976.

[81] 'Syria on edge over college murder,' *The Times*, London, March 3, 1977; *New York Times*, July 10, 1977; see also Seale, 1988, p. 317, for an extensive list of victims.

[82] *New York Times*, July 10, 1977; see also Seale, 1988, p. 321.

pillars of the regime's legitimacy.[83] In addition, Hafiz al-Asad made special efforts to attend prayers at the Sunni Umayyad Mosque every Friday to prove his religious proclivities.[84] It is important to note attacks were not entirely restricted to Alawites, but also 'traitorous' Sunnis who worked closely with the regime. For instance, Asad's Sunni foreign minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam was wounded in an assassination attempt in early 1977.[85]

While the Muslim brothers were engaged in arbitrary acts of assassination in the hope of highlighting the Alawite political role[s], the Syrian regime began to carry out its own political assassinations for the opposite reason: to conceal the Alawite political role. Lebanese Druze politician Kamal Jumblat was assassinated near his home village of Mukhtarah on March 16, 1977, in all likelihood, by Syrian intelligence agents.[86] Jumblat had become a major obstacle to Hafiz al-Asad's objectives in Lebanon by defying Syria's entry into the Lebanese theatre.[87] It was however, Jumblat's comments about the Alawite character of the Syrian regime that may have cost him his life. Karim Bakradouni member of the Lebanese Phalanges Party in the 1970s suggests that

> [...] when Kamal Jumblat began broaching that prohibited equation i.e. the talk about the Alawi-Sunni conflict or about a[n] Alawi-Maronite alliance; he was making what I consider a big mistake.[88]

Kamal Jumblat's son Walid, who took over the leadership of the Lebanese Druze, also believed that his father got into an "inappropriate conversation, so to

---

[83] Reuvan Avi-Ran, 1991, p. 198.

[84] *New York Times*, July 10, 1977.

[85] *The Times*, London, March 3, 1977.

[86] *New York Times*, March 17, 1977; Farid al-Khazen, 'Kamal Jumblatt, the Uncrowned Druze Prince of the Left,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Apr., 1988), p. 183.

[87] Al-Khazen, 1988, p. 183.

[88] حرب اللبنان (The Lebanon War), Documentary, Al-Jazeera, 2001.

speak, against the Alawi confession in itself."[89] It seems that the topic of Alawite political roles was highly sensitive and the Asad regime felt compelled to take any measure to stamp out the discourse altogether. The preparedness of the Asad regime to assassinate major political figures who threatened its core interests surfaced with the murder of Jumblat. According to Bassam Abu Sherif of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), Jumblat "was a great man, a giant, and he was killed because he was a great man and a giant."[90] PLO leader, Yasir Arafat, said at the time "an era of assassinations has begun."[91]

In Syria, despite regime efforts to defuse the domestic tensions and to eliminate accusations of an Alawite political cabal, the danger for the regime and ordinary Alawites continued to escalate. A major catalyst for escalation of the conflict occurred on June 16, 1979 when a large group of cadets was massacred at the Aleppo artillery academy.[92] The massacre, facilitated by a Sunni Ba'athist Officer, was an extremely worrying sign of building sectarian division and hatred within two of the regime's key pillars, the army and the Ba'ath Party.[93] Two months later a prominent Alawite neurosurgeon was executed outside his clinic.[94] And in late September two high ranking Alawite officers, Colonel Mohammad Jamil Naddah, and Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim Alia, were gunned down.[95] Undoubtedly, most of the Sunni community did not approve of the tactics of the Muslim Brothers; they could however, empathise with the insurgents' motivation, as they felt increasingly excluded from economic and political power.[96]

---

[89] Ibid; see also Seale, 1988, pp. 288-289.

[90] Ibid.

[91] *New York Times*, March 17, 1977.

[92] Nikolaos Van Dam suggests a figure of thirty two, Van Dam, 1996, p. 91, while other sources give sixty as the casualty figure, *Journal of Church and State*, No.21, 1979, p.602; *New York Times*, September 4, 1979; Seale, 1988, p. 316. Alawite sources give a larger figure of 100.

[93] Van Dam, 1996, p.91.

[94] Marvine Howe, 'Moslem Extremists in Syria trying to Destabilise Government with Terrorist Attacks,' *New York Times*, August 20, 1979.

[95] '3 More Alawites Slain in Syria,' *New York Times*, September 23, 1979.

[96] See for example, *New York Times*, August 20, 1979.

With emotions rising on all sides Hafiz al-Asad required a delicate balancing act, to maintain the essential support of Alawites without overly antagonising and radicalising the Sunni majority. Crystallisation along sectarian lines (as was occurring in Lebanon) would entail a very perilous situation for Alawites. The pressure bearing on the regime produced cracks in Asad's cross-sectarian coalition. One of the few rural Sunnis near the top of the security apparatus, Major General Naji Jamil, a long time friend of Hafiz al-Asad was 'retired' in March 1978 after "expressing disrespect for Asad" and his policies. He was replaced by an Alawite officer, General Muhammad al-Khuly, increasing the Alawite appearance of the regime.[97] Yet Hafiz al-Asad maintained a Ba'athist, and nationalist discourse, while accusing the insurgents of being extremists and agents of foreign enemy interests. For example, Information Minister Ahmad Iskander announced "We have evidence that the extremist gangs behind the current killings are connected with the Camp David camp."[98] In other words, the regime claimed that the United States was behind the Syrian unrest to "punish" the regime for its opposition to the peace accord between Egypt and Israel.[99]

With the escalation of the assassination campaign to two or three murders a week by October 1979,[100] there was a genuine risk of Alawite retaliation. This would make it impossible for Hafiz al-Asad to present the situation in non-sectarian terms. In Latakia in late August - early September, Alawites rioted and fought Sunni Muslims after Youssef Sarem, an Alawite religious leader, was assassinated.[101] Although there is conflicting evidence about casualties from the

---

[97] Seale, 1988, pp. 323-324.

[98] *New York Times*, August 20, 1979.

[99] 'CIA accused of fomenting internal disorder in Syria,' *The Times*, London, March 14, 1980; 'Assad's Star Fades in City Where He Was a Hero,' *New York Times*, April 3, 1980.

[100] Christopher Wren, 'Political Killers in Syria Taking 2 to 3 Lives a Week,' *New York Times*, October 28, 1979.

[101] *New York Times*, October 14, 1979.

rioting, it seems that the violence was at a relatively low level.[102] However, one thousand paratroops under the command of Rifa'at al-Asad were quickly deployed to the city to suppress the Alawite rioters and five people were reported killed.[103] The nature and rapidity of Asad's response speaks volumes about the danger that he perceived of escalation in sectarian violence between Sunnis and Alawites. Reports that Tartous also, ninety kilometres to the south of Latakia, was closed to civilian traffic, indicate that sectarian tensions had already begun to spread.[104] It seemed as if the objectives of the Muslim Brotherhood of highlighting sectarian divisions were beginning to achieve results. In Damascus, Alawites clung together for security, with some military personnel even sending their families home to the Latakia region following death threats.[105]

Signs of discord amongst Alawites and against the Asad regime began to emerge. Alawite security bosses, who represented the view of most of the Alawite community, began demanding a stronger response to the Brotherhood attacks, while on the other hand Alawite liberals, concerned about long term consequences for the sect, began questioning whether the President should "include more Sunnis in his regime" to appease the Sunni majority.[106] An Alawite poet, Mamdūh 'Udwān (d.2004), decried the "sectarian face" of the regime at a meeting of the Union of Writers and Journalists in October 9 1979 and remarked, "why does the regime lie? Lies stem from fear and the regime that lies fears the people, fears that the people will see it as it really is."[107] In addition, there were some rumblings among Alawites that those with tribal connections to Hafiz al-Asad were

---

[102] A report in the *New York Times*, September 4, 1979 suggested zero casualties from sectarian fighting, whereas another report, *New York Times*, October 14, 1979 reported forty dead from the rioting.

[103] 'Syria Said to Send Army Troops To Latakia to Put Down Rioting,' *New York Times*, September 4, 1979; *Journal of Church and State*, No. 22, 1980, pp. 183-184.

[104] *New York Times*, September 4, 1979.

[105] *New York Times*, October 28, 1979.

[106] Marvine Howe, *New York Times*, August 20, 1979, cites diplomatic sources in Damascus.

[107] Batatu, 1999, p. 271.

disproportionately favoured.[108] Asad's choices lay between conciliatory approaches towards Sunni moderates while trying to marginalise the Muslim Brothers as minority extremists, or he could ramp up security measures to stamp out criticism of the regime altogether. Initially it seemed as if Asad leaned toward the former approach.[109]

In contrast to the 1850s, it seemed, Sunni antagonism was unable to splinter Alawite solidarity and actually achieved the reverse effect. The Syrian military, with its preponderance of Alawites, showed "no signs of disaffection" and the Alawite community appeared to rally around the president.[110] Political conditions had altered dramatically since the time of Ismail Khayr Bey. First, the Sunnis were no longer represented by a powerful and coherent political structure, in fact, it was the reverse and the Alawites stood on the side of the hegemonic political formation. Secondly, the Alawites were no longer restricted to their compartmentalised mountain region and had developed a much broader identity based on their common experience relative to the Syrian majority. Although Ismail Khayr Bey, no doubt, had leadership abilities, he was no comparison to the well educated and politically astute Hafiz al-Asad in 1979. The most crucial element however, was the extent to which the Alawites had gone out onto a political limb. The stakes of a political reversal were far too high for the Alawite tribes to risk any serious internal fragmentation of their community. Hafiz al-Asad had ruled over Syria for a decade, more than twice as long as Ismail Khayr Bey's brief governance in the Jabal Sahiliyah. It did seem however, that history may have been about to catch up to the Alawites.

---

[108] *New York Times*, October 14, 1979.

[109] Asad began by replacing six governors, see: 'Crisis Reportedly Defused by Show of Force,' *New York Times*, April 13, 1980; 'Technocrats conspicuous in Syria's new Cabinet,' *The Times*, London, January 17, 1980.

[110] John F. Kifner, 'Strains in Damascus Testing Assad Rule,' *New York Times*, October 28, 1979.

In 1980 full scale sectarian civil war between Sunnis and Alawites seemed imminent in Syria.[111] Three factors contributed to an increase in tensions. Economically, socialist policy and high inflation (thirty percent) fuelled resentment amongst the merchant class leading to strikes and demonstrations.[112] *New York Times* correspondent, Marvine Howe, was in Aleppo as anti-regime sentiment continued to surge and he encountered many people willing to speak candidly. One Aleppo merchant voiced his frustration with government policy: "We do not like socialism and we do not like the Russians...you cannot work and make money under socialism."[113] The Islamic revolution in Iran also lent impetus to opposition to the Syrian regime; even among secular minded Syrians. This was ironic considering the relationship that would form between the Islamic Republic and the Asad dynasty. A report from Aleppo dated March 31, 1980 revealed growing anti regime sentiments; a civil servant stated: "There's no Shah or Khomeini here, but otherwise it's like Iran – a ruling clan with its secret police, excessive military spending, illicit wealth and thousands of political prisoners."[114] An engineer said that "like Iran, the people are against corruption and immorality and are with the Muslim Brothers, we're Muslims [...] but we don't want an Islamic republic."[115] Comments like these highlight how the Muslim Brotherhood was winning the contest for the moral high ground in their struggle with the Asad regime.

Resentment towards the blatant corruption of the President's brother Rifa'at al-Asad, also began to seriously undermine the credibility of Hafiz al-Asad in early 1980. Critics asked how an "honourable man could allow corruption to

---

[111] Robert Fisk, 'Sectarian tensions over Alawite dominance could lead to outbreak of civil war in Syria, '*The Times*, London, April 2, 1980; Stanley F. Reed, 'Dateline Syria: Fin de Règime?' *Foreign Policy*, No.39 (Summer, 1980) pp. 176-190.

[112] 'Inflation and corruption threaten the Baathist regime in Syria,' *The Times*, London, March 28, 1980.

[113] *The Times*, London, March 28, 1980.

[114] Marvine Howe, 'Assad's Star Fades in City Where He Was a Hero,' *New York Times*, April 3, 1980.

[115] *New York Times*, April 3, 1980.

spread into his own family?”[116] These sources of resentment against the regime began to find overall expression in anti-Alawite sentiment. A professional man, who requested anonymity, voiced the connection between the Alawites and the mushrooming discontent among Syrians. He said that the main problem in Syria was the domination of power by Alawites through their hold on key positions in the armed forces and the civilian and military intelligence [...] in education; he suggested most students allowed to go abroad are Alawites who return to take key jobs. “We’re a secular family but we’re with the Muslim Brothers – like ninety percent if this city [Aleppo].”[117]

The Asad regime was no doubt alarmed by the surge of sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood among moderate Sunnis and decided on a direct course of action. On April 6 and 7, 1980, the Third Army and Special Forces units commanded by Rifa’at al-Asad entered Aleppo and Hama in force. For around two weeks both cities were swept for weapons and Muslim Brotherhood members and sympathisers.[118] The crackdown was severe with around six thousand people arrested and thirty executed.[119] The Mukhabarat played a major, often ruthless role, in repressing the growing dissent. For instance, men were often apprehended for simply having a beard. [120] Harsh examples were made of others, for instance, two doctors from Hama who were taken from their homes and summarily shot and then mutilated.[121]

The predominance of Alawites in both the military and the Mukhabarat units involved in the crackdowns served to increase sectarian tensions. This was

---

[116] Robert Fisk, ‘Disturbing change of style in Syria,’ *The Times*, London, April, 2, 1980.

[117] Marvine Howe, *New York Times*, April 3, 1980.

[118] Stanley F. Reed, ‘Dateline Syria: Fin de Règime?’ *Foreign Policy*, No.39 (Summer, 1980) p.176; ‘Syrian leader eases unrest and strikes,’ *New York Times*, April 13, 1980; see also Stanley Reed, ‘Little Brother and The Brotherhood,’ *The Nation*, May 16, 1981, p. 592.

[119] *New York Times*, April 13, 1980; Stanley F. Reed, 1980, p. 176.

[120] Stanley F. Reed, 1980, p. 177.

[121] G. Michaud, & J. Paul, ‘The Importance of Bodyguards,’ *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), p.30; Stanley Reed, ‘Little Brother and The Brotherhood,’ *The Nation*, May 16, 1981, p. 592.

not restricted to tension between Alawites and Sunni Islamists. A Syrian Communist Party document was scathing of the regime in 1980: "When the French ruled this country they failed to divide it like this regime [...] this regime rests on two bases: sectarianism and despotism [...]"[122] For Alawites, who had sought emancipation in Syria through secularism and a social revolution, this perception of sectarianism and despotism by themselves and the Asad regime suggested the failure of those aspirations. Resultant increased insecurity among Alawites only served to further embed their reliance on Hafiz al-Asad's regime.

The regime narrowly avoided catastrophe on June 27, (or 26)[123] 1980, when the Muslim Brotherhood almost succeeded in assassinating Hafiz al-Asad in a grenade attack. He was saved apparently by a bodyguard who fell on the device.[124] There is little information on the identity of the bodyguard, but assuming he was an Alawite, possibly from Asad's clan, as was the norm,[125] it shows the depth of devotion that was held towards Asad.[126] According to Syria scholar and diplomat, Nikolaos Van Dam, the near successful assassination of Hafiz al-Asad's created a "wave of fury" in the Alawite community. Rifa'at al-Asad ordered eighty men of his defence companies to fly by helicopter to the prison at Palmyra where they massacred between 550[127] and 1,181[128] Muslim Brotherhood prisoners in their cells. The sheer savagery of this event hardly bears comprehension and gives some indication of the level of animosity that was possible between Alawites and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood.

---

[122] Stanley F. Reed, 'Fin de Règime?1980, p. 179.

[123] Batatu, 1999, p.269.

[124] Stanley Reed, 'Little Brother and The Brotherhood,' *The Nation*, May 16, 1981, p. 592.

[125] Michaud & Paul, 1982, p. 29.

[126] Fuad Khuri suggests that Hafiz al-Asad may be elevated in Alawite folklore alongside their greatest historical figures, see: Fuad Khuri, *Imams and Emirs, State, Religion and Sects in Islam*(London: Saqi Books, 1990), p. 201.

[127] Van Dam, 1996, p.105-106.

[128] Michaud, G & Paul, J., 1982, p.30; Van Dam, 1996, p.105-106.

Hafiz al-Asad still worked to defuse tensions both with displays of force and by seeking to appease opposition leaders with promises of government reform.[129] He also continued a policy of undermining the Muslim Brothers by shifting blame for the unrest to external factors. In a speech on March 8, Asad said he had been a devout Muslim all his life, and sarcastically derided the Muslim Brothers: "[...] but they do not want to accept my Islam [...] maybe I need a certificate of good conduct from their masters in Washington. To do that I need to go to Jerusalem to submit to the Israelis as Sadat has done."[130] It could be read that Asad was referring to *my* Islam as Alawite Islam, which would be a rare acknowledgement of his Alawite origins. He was also however, using a clever strategy that has become a hallmark of the Asad regime, discrediting opponents by linking them with unpopular events involving the Americans and Israelis, in this case, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's peace deal with the Israelis.

The regime also looked to its rural supporters in its struggle with the mainly urban Muslim Brothers. On March 10, 1980, Asad announced to the General Federation of Syrian Peasants plans to put half a million peasants under arms, stating: "The peasants will exercise the role of liquidating gangs of reaction, killers and saboteurs."[131] The 'peasants' in this case would include Alawites but also rural Sunnis who had benefited from Ba'athist policies. Asad sought to mobilise support along socio-economic lines, circumventing sectarian stress fractures that would isolate the Alawites. The regime instead sought to isolate the Muslim Brotherhood. On July 7, 1980, shortly after the failed assassination of Asad, the Syrian Peoples Council passed legislation that made membership of the Muslim Brotherhood a capital offence. The bill included an amnesty of one month for Syrian based members, and two months for those based outside Syria, in the

---

[129] *New York Times*, April 13, 1980; *The Times*, London, January 17, 1980.

[130] 'Syria Denounces U.S. as Mastermind of Plot to remove his Regime,' *New York Times*, March 9, 1980.

[131] 'Syria to arm peasants in fight against 'killers,' *The Times*, London , March 11, 1980.

hope that many would abandon the Muslim Brother's cause.[132] This new tougher policy was quickly enacted, with two Brotherhood commanders killed by August 17.[133]

Although the situation seemed dire for the Asad regime as it faced relentless and widening opposition, if the Alawites remained unified behind the regime the chances of it being toppled were small. Opposition figures like the exiled co-founder of the Ba'ath party, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, recognised this fact when he professed that the two bases of the Asad regime were "dictatorship and confessionalism."[134] Al-Bitar hence tried to promotea differentiation between the Alawites and the Asad regime:

> It is necessary to distinguish between the regime and the great body of Alawi who had no role in establishing it and are part of the silent majority of the people who resist its crimes, at least with their hearts.[135]

By drawing a distinction between the Alawite community and the Asad regime, al-Bitar tried to alleviate Alawite insecurity. This would weaken Hafiz al-Asad's grip on power, hence al-Bitar flagged himself as a threat to Hafiz al-Asad's rule. How close to the bone were al-Bitar's comments, was perhaps proven when, like Kamal Jumblatt, he was assassinated a few weeks afterwards on July 21, 1980 in Paris.[136]

Meanwhile, the regime continued to grasp at any opportunity to improve its legitimacy and popularity. In September 1980, Asad quickly agreed to a

---

[132] 'Syria outlaws Muslim Brotherhood,' *The Times*, London, July 9, 1980.

[133] 'Chief of Muslim militants shot dead in Syria,' *The Times*, London, August 18, 1980.

[134] Transcript of an interview with Salah al-Din al-Bitar, *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles, 1982, pp. 21-23.

[135] Cited in Batatu, 1999, p. 229.

[136] 'Former Syrian Premier is Slain at Paris Office by Unknown Gunman,' *New York Times*, July 22, 1980; *The Times*, London, July 22, 1980.

political merger with Libya as a way of proving his pan-Arabist credentials.[137] The merger was only ever symbolic and was never consummated in any serious way. In October 1980 the Asad regime took steps to move closer to the Soviet Union,[138] and a renewal of arms supplies, which the Soviets had been reluctant to deliver in recent years.[139] The official pretext for the arms requirement was the 'struggle with Israelis,' but it was likely the regime's domestic problems that necessitated a military upgrade.

In late October 1980 the regime announced victory in its struggle with the Brotherhood, "The Muslim Brothers are either behind bars or in their graves," stated information minister Ahmed Iskander, "the rest are insignificant and are being hunted down."[140] However, further security forces' crackdowns on Brotherhood cells only served to highlight how widespread the insurgency had become, especially in Aleppo and Hama, but also in Damascus. For example, seven Muslim brothers were killed and large quantities of arms and explosives were uncovered in the al-Qadam neighbourhood of Damascus on December 29, 1980. And there were reports of a mass execution in Aleppo's central square of two hundred dissidents in late December.[141] Considering their earlier claims that the Brotherhood was finished, the regime renewed claims of Israeli and American interference in Syrian affairs.[142]

By early 1981 it appeared that the regime was finally regaining control of the situation. There was a reduction in the levels of violence in 1981 and the information minister renewed the claim to victory: "The Muslim Brotherhood is smashed inside Syria. Those who have been active inside Syria are running away

---

[137] 'Syria agrees to unite with Libya,' *The Times*, London, September 3, 1980.

[138] The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, widely condemned in the Islamic world, caused a dilemma for Asad because he could not criticise his key ally, see *New York Times*, March 9, 1980.

[139] 'Syria signs military and political pact with Moscow,' *The Times*, London, October 9, 1980.

[140] 'Hunting of Muslim Brotherhood reveals its strength,' *The Times*, London, October 25, 1980.

[141] 'Amman report of mass shootings denied by Syria,' *The Times*, London, January 3, 1981.

[142] 'Banned Muslim Brotherhood lose 7 in Syria,' *The Times*, London, December 30, 1980.

[...] the larger part of the opposition has gathered in West Germany and Britain."[143] A huge bombing in Damascus in late November 1981, which levelled four apartment buildings and killed up to two hundred people, proved, however, that the Muslim Brothers remained on the offensive.[144]

The Hama Tragedy and the Failure of Alawite Integration

In early 1982 the regime's struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood reached a critical point. The massacre in the city of Hama in the first weeks of February 1982 has been well documented.[145] The significance of Hama, in terms of its repercussions for Alawite 'asabiyya, requires attention. The military operation against Hama crushed the Muslim Brotherhood as a force in Syria; however, it also spelt the demise of Alawite hopes for genuine emancipation in Syrian society marking the ultimate ascendency of sectarian insecurity as the dominant feature of Syrian politics.

In January 1982 the Mukhabarat discovered a coup plot among some junior air force officers.[146] Information gained in interrogation of the conspirators led to an operation against a Muslim Brotherhood hideout in Hama on the night of February 2, 1982. A unit of around three hundred soldiers from the predominantly Alawite 21st Mechanized Infantry Brigade, 3rd division,[147] and possibly some Alawite Mukhabarat agents were ambushed in a back alley and wiped out.[148] The unit apparently discovered a large arms cache prepared for a major offensive against the regime.[149] The Brotherhood was forced to launch its offensive

---

[143] *The Times*, London, February 28, 1981.

[144] John Kifner, 'Envoy Catches Syria at a Very Bad Time,' *New York Times*, December 6, 1981; *The Times*, London, December 1, 1981; *New York Times*, May 29, 1982.

[145] See for example, Omar Ilsley, 'Syria: Hama Massacre,' in *Hushed Voices* , U*nacknowledged Atrocities of the 20th Century*, ed. H. Adam (Berkshire Academic Press, 2011).

[146] *New York Times*, May 29, 1982.

[147] 'Syria said to raze part of Rebel City,' *New York Times*, February 21, 1982.

[148] *New York Times*, May 29, 1982.

[149] *New York Times*, February 14, 1982.

prematurely with a call to rebellion broadcast from the city minarets.[150] By the following day much of Hama was 'liberated' from government control with Ba'ath officials either captured or executed. There is evidence to suggest that simultaneous rebellions were planned for Latakia, Tartous and Aleppo,[151] which if successful, would have encircled the Jabal Sahiliyah. This perhaps demonstrates careful planning by the insurgents with intent to decapitate the regime from its Alawite power base. Nothing came of these other planned rebellions,[152] although the Syrian Army did shell neighbourhoods in Tripoli in Lebanon, after Syrian troops came under attack.[153]

The revolt forced Asad's hand also. Any chance to follow the conciliatory path, advocated by Alawite liberals, was lost. The uprising seemed to signify intractable antipathy against the perceived Alawite nature of the regime, despite the efforts of Hafiz al-Asad to suppress that discourse. It was now an existential matter for the regime. A western diplomat in Syria at the time, commented, "It's far too early for a death watch on this government, but a year or two down the road could be a different story."[154] For Alawites, the final defeat of opposition to the Asad regime at Hama, and elsewhere, seemed a necessary act if their social and political elevation was not to be brutally - if history was any guide - reversed.

According to Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, the decision to annihilate the Muslim Brotherhood, once and for all came from Rifa'at al-Asad, who told his brother: "I have always been under your orders, but now I don't want to obey you any more, you always ask me to be patient but now I am going to hit them." The Shaykh recounted how the Muslim Brothers lived under ground, so when Rifa'at al-Asad "hit them [...] all the city was demolished." Shaykh Eskiocak defended the actions

[150] 'Syria Pulls a Tigers Tail,' *New York Times*, February 14, 1982.

[151] 'Syrian Troops Are Said to Battle Rebels Encircled in Central City,' *The Times*, London, February 16, 1982; *New York Times*, February 12, 1982.

[152] *New York Times*, February 14, 1982.

[153] *New York Times*, June 21, 1983.

[154] 'Asad Said to Be in Control Despite Rebel Uprising,' *New York Times*, February 14, 1982.

of the regime in February 1982: “why was there a problem in Hama? It was the Muslim Brothers who hit the officer cadets who were graduating from the military school, Alawite and Sunni, yes they shot them, Hafiz al-Asad couldn’t stand this anymore and [allowed his brother to] hit Hama.”[155]

These types of justifications for the military operation in Hama explain why the Alawite dominated army and security forces remained loyal throughout. A repeat of the Iranian situation three years previously, where government soldiers refused to fire on anti-government demonstrators, would have been fatal for the Asad regime. Some early reports of defections amongst the government troops[156] proved to be false and were likely due to some insurgents donning uniforms of fallen government soldiers.[157] Other reports claimed that some soldiers refused to carry out orders to fire on civilians.[158] Overall, however, the army’s discipline remained intact.[159]

According to contemporary sources, the regime deployed up to twelve thousand troops,[160] including the 21st Mechanized Brigade of the 3rd Armoured Division and the 47th Independent Armoured Brigade, and importantly, the elite Defence Companies commanded by Rifa’at al-Asad, who oversaw the operation.[161] Although all the units were commanded by loyal Alawites, contrary to popular belief, the force was not entirely Alawite. A sizeable contingent of Kurds participated as well; hence, graffiti in the wake of the Hama operation included Kurds as targets for “direct vengeance.”[162] By using Kurdish troops,

---

[155] Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, interview with this author, Antakya, March 28, 2011.

[156] ‘Rebels hold out on island in Hama,’ *The Times*, London, February 15, 1982.

[157] ‘Hama rebels crushed, say Syrians,’ *The Times*, London, February 16, 1982.

[158] *New York Times*, March 24, 1982.

[159] ‘Syrian Rebellion Simmers Down but Tensions Endure,’ *New York Times*, March 24, 1982.

[160] Seale, 1988, p. 333.

[161] *New York Times*, February 14, 1982.

[162] Tejel, 2009, p. 67.

Hafiz al-Asad managed to spread the 'blame' somewhat and avoid the fighting being reduced entirely to a Sunni-Alawite confrontation.[163]

Nonetheless, the battle was waged with all the brutality of two communities with a long history of social and religious hatred. The Islamist insurgents fought to re-establish the 'natural' political order in Syria against the 'heretical' Alawite usurpers. Alawites fought for the survival of the Asad regime that they believed was their best hope for security and equality in Syrian society.[164] Regime units unleashed a massive bombardment upon the city via artillery and aircraft during three weeks of fighting. Around twenty thousand lives were lost as a result, not to mention the almost complete annihilation of large sections of Hama.[165]

One small, bullet ridden, section of the old city remains intact as an explicit reminder to the residents of Hama of the consequences of confronting the Asad regime (see figure 7). These ruins also stood as a symbol of the 'Faustian Bargain' that Alawites entered into with the Asad regime during those few violent weeks in February 1982. The bargain comprised Alawite security through continued Asad rule but the cost was direct association with the massacre and loss of any chance of genuine sectarian reconciliation between Sunnis and Alawites.

---

[163] Tejel suggests that Hafiz al-Asad maintained a "functional alliance with the Kurds" which he utilised increasingly during the internal struggle of 1976-1982, see Ibid., p. 62.

[164] This view is reflected in the definition of Hafiz al-Asad provided by Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak on page 141 above, when he said that he ruled with "equality."

[165] This figure is derived from population records of the city of Hama between 1979 and 1983, see Onn Winckler, *Demographic Developments and Population Policies in Ba'thist Syria*, (Brighton & Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), p.72.

Figure 7. Remains of the Old City in Hama



Source: the author, August, 2009

Important to the final outcome of the rebellion was the failure of the revolt to spread beyond Hama. This was no doubt the regime's greatest fear, and the insurgents' greatest hope. A review of contemporary sources reveals how the regime frantically tried to conceal the scale and nature of the fighting. Accusations of American and Israeli plots escalated to a higher level than at any point previously.[166] The city was sealed off completely and reports coming from Hama were denied as outright lies.[167]

Alawite trepidation about a broad backlash in the Sunni world against the Asad regime was no doubt increased by the active involvement of both the

---

[166] 'Syria says US exaggerated unrest in Hama,' *The Times*, London, February 12, 1982.

[167] 'Syria says 'Times' man lied,' *The Times*, London, February, 14, 1982.

Jordanian and Iraqi regimes in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood uprising.[168] The desire of the Syrian regime to quell suggestions in the Arab world of a Syrian internal crisis was evident during an Arab conference in Tunis, where Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam said there had been no incidents in the country, only a "security search for arms dumps."[169] In another obvious expression of regime concerns about escalation, the state newspaper, *Syria Times*, announced that the people of Aleppo "denounced the crimes committed by the Muslim Brother gangs in Hama, through which, they added another black page to their record of conspiracy against national unity and the achievements of Syria's masses."[170] As it happened the rest of the country, apart from some minor strikes in Aleppo, remained eerily silent as events unfolded in Hama.

It would be a mistake to consider Hama as representative of the broader Syrian Sunni majority. Hama had long been a stronghold of Islamic conservatism almost equivalent to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.[171] This religious differentiation from other Syrian cities remains clearly evident today. Most Syrians however, are pragmatists by nature, a point that Abd al-Halim Khaddam emphasised to this writer: "the Syrian person/citizen is not a radical, is not aggressive, [but] they know who is ruling the country; they understand what is going on."[172] According to this appraisal, Syrians in general understood, all too well, the political reality of their country, but chose to make the necessary compromises to ensure their survival. In this vein, an interesting parallel can be made between the Alawite revolt of 1318 at Jablah and the Hama revolt of 1982. Both were carried out by a militant faction of their respective groups, both

---

[168] Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran, Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: Taurus, 2006), pp. 54, 61; *New York Times*, November 12, 1985.

[169] *The Times*, London, February 15, 1982.

[170] 'Syrian Press denounces Brotherhood,' *The Times*, London, February 17, 1982.

[171] Itzchak Weismann , 'Sa'id Hawwa: The Making of a Radical Muslim Thinker in Modern Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), pp. 602-603.

[172] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, Paris, September, 2009.

confronted a hegemonic power with little chance of success and neither was ultimately supported by their wider group. This comparison demonstrates a common characteristic of Levantine people that contradicts some misconceptions. For instance, it contradicts Philip Salzman's 'balanced opposition' theory, as there was not an automatic 'cultural' resort to sectarian solidarity by Sunnis when conflict erupted.[173] In contrast to the Jablah revolt of 1318, however, the sectarian 'asabiyya of Alawites in 1982 forced the community into closer solidarity through a common sense of insecurity as they perceived a uniform rejection by the Sunni community.

The events of February 1982 left a legacy of deep emotional scarring of the residents of Hama. This most likely explains the "sullen uncommunicative" demeanour of the populace, observed by De Atkine in 1996,[174] and, in stark contrast to the rest of Syria, remained clearly evident to this author in 2009. This is likely due to what the regime did to them, but also possibly stems from the feeling that, in a cruel betrayal, their Sunni Muslim compatriots tacitly endorsed what occurred by not coming to their aid. For survivors of the Hama catastrophe, resentment against the Asad dynasty and the Alawite community would not fade with time. In 2011, for example, a mother recounted the killing of her sixteen year old son: "I started screaming and the Alawite officer who grabbed me said, 'your son is a criminal, he killed himself.' I can never forget his face ever, ever, ever." Another survivor's comments demonstrate the association of the entire Alawite community with the Hama massacre: "Hama was a conservative city and its people were stubborn [and] defied submission, but the Alawites taught the rest of the country a lesson with Hama. It was a crime to be a Hamawi."[175]

---

[173] Philip Salzman, *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Humanity Books, 2008), p. 11.

[174] DeAtkine, Norvelle 'The Arab as insurgent and counterinsurgent,' in B. Rubin, (ed.) *Conflict and Insurgency in the Contemporary Middle East*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2009).

[175] Suleiman al-Khalidi, 'Survivors of Syria's Hama Massacre watch and hope,' *Reuters*, July 7, 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/07/us-syria-hama-idUSTRE7665R620110707.

In the final analysis, the Hama revolt was a critical moment in Alawite history. Alawite involvement in putting down the Hama rebellion, once and for all, proved their commitment to the Asad regime. An interesting counterfactual would be if the Alawite officers and troops had mutinied and chosen not to cooperate in the 'destruction' of Hama. This may have prevented the direct association of the Alawite community with this 'black mark' on Syrian history, and improved the prospects for genuine sectarian conciliation. But this would have seriously destabilised the Asad regime, which could also have led to negative outcomes for Alawites. It is therefore, understandable that Alawites felt there was no alternative to what transpired in Hama.

Blame cannot be entirely placed on Hafiz al-Asad either, for the approach that he took. Up until February 1982, he arguably tried to apply the conciliatory approach advocated by Alawite liberals, tempered with strong reprisals against those he portrayed as 'marginal extremists' and 'foreign agents,' which included the people of Hama. In general, he sought to maintain popular appeal and avoid drastic repression against the majority. The provocation of the Muslim brothers left little choice but to resort to extreme measures, or, step aside; an option that neither he, nor the Alawite elite could countenance. Hafiz al-Asad proved his resolve by his uncompromising suppression of violent opposition, which no doubt, gained the confidence of many Alawites and conversely, convinced Sunni opponents of the futility of open resistance. Asad's steely nerves were displayed for all shortly after the Hama rebellion, when he "plunged into the crowd" after a speech in Damascus and walked several miles through the centre of the city in "a stunning security risk."[176] It was around this period that a clear divergence emerges in Alawite 'asabiyya, between the sectarian 'asabiyya of the broad Alawite population, which was increasingly based on communal insecurity; and the tribal/clan 'asabiyya of the Asad family and close supporters. The latter

[176] *New York Times*, March 24, 1982.

'asabiyya, more closely approximated Ibn Khaldun's ideas about the effects of corruption and decadence on group solidarity, a prime example, being Rifa'at al-Asad who felt empowered by the 'success' of his vicious crackdown in Hama.

Ultimately the efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters to destabilise the Asad regime and bring its downfall backfired. The end result was the destruction of all active opposition in Syria and the strengthening of Alawite – Asad 'asabiyya. For Alawites, this was not necessarily a victory however. Attempts to sustainably integrate with Syrian society and shift Alawite political identity toward the majority as Arabs and orthodox Muslims essentially foundered at Hama. The Alawites were now forced into a position whereby their improved status in Syria could only be maintained through coercion. In cooperation with the Asad dynasty, the population now had to be closely monitored and repressed where necessary in order to prevent a potentially ferocious backlash. Although members of the Alawite community dominated the state, in the minds of many Syrians, Alawites still remained a sectarian minority who 'forgot themselves.' In this negative political context, liberal Alawite voices became virtually non-existent. One rare exception was the Alawite Communist Party member and writer, Louay Hussein, who was imprisoned without trial for seven years in 1984, then subjected to travel bans and Mukhabarat harassment.[177]

The repressive political system in Syria, which permeates every aspect of society, largely extends from Alawite insecurity about the potential for the Sunni majority to take revenge for the Hama massacre. From the moment the dust settled after the last artillery shell on Hama in February 1982 until March 2011, Syria was essentially in political lockdown.

[177] Rula Amin, *Al-Jazeera*, July 11, 2011,'Syrian opposition figure triggers debate,' http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2011/07/201171111013603226.html ; *Reporters without Borders* website: http://en.rsf.org/middle-east-north-africa-journalists-targeted-by-23-03-2011,39852.html, (accessed July 11, 2011).

Alawite Socio-Economic Development under Hafiz al-Asad – 'The Spoils of Power'

Until March 1982 the Asad regime's long term survival was not a foregone conclusion. Having survived the difficulties of the first dozen years, especially the Muslim Brotherhood assault, the regime's hold on power was now secured thanks to the broad support of Alawites. What socio-economic benefits accrued to Alawites from this support? Would the spoils of power be distributed equally, and what would be the effect on Alawite 'asabiyya?

Despite publically disowning them,[178] Hafiz al-Asad was deeply conscious of his Alawite origins and recognized the critical importance of unequivocal Alawite support. An anonymous Syrian related to this author how during the rule of Hafiz al-Asad there was a perception that "an Alawite from the Latakia region could murder someone and get away with it," so protected was this group. Asad's maintenance of strong links with his group of origin corresponds with Ibn Khaldun's theory about the nature of a dynasty in its 'first stage.'[179] A good illustration of this occurred in mid 1976 when Asad stood for four hours in the "dusty main street" of his home town of Qurdaha talking to the villagers about their concerns.[180]

Initially at least, Hafiz al-Asad did cater to Alawite socio-economic development very well. Recalling the historic socio-economic circumstances of Alawites, who were often forced to sell their daughters into servitude,[181] the material gains for the broader Alawite community in the first decades of Asad rule were substantial. Socio-economic and infrastructural developments improved the quality of life for the mostly rural Alawite population.

[178] Y. Sadowski, 'The Evolution of Political Identity in Syria,' in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, eds. Telhami, S. & Barnett, M. (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2002) p. 138.

[179] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p.146.

[180] *New York Times*, October 10, 1976.

[181] Batatu, 1999, p. 41.

By 1992 the Euphrates Dam enabled electricity supply to ninety five percent of Syrian villages nationwide.[182] Although most of Syria, including the Alawite region was linked to the grid, consistent provision of electricity has proven problematic. Daily power outages of four to six hours have been a feature of Syrian life since 1985.[183] This was caused largely by a combination of drought, rising demand, and Turkey's increasing usage of upstream Euphrates waters.[184] Electricity shortages have been a major obstacle to Syria's overall economic development inhibiting domestic commerce and foreign investors. Yet, considering that prior to 1970 most Alawite villages had no electricity at all and "fell asleep and awoke with the sun," the period of Asad rule brought a major advance for Alawites.[185] Also, because Alawite commercial activity in their home villages remained mainly low tech agriculture, orchards and tobacco growing, there was a low dependence on electricity. Thus, while the unreliable electricity infrastructure was possibly a major source of dissatisfaction for urban dwellers, it was quite likely perceived in Alawite villages as a significant improvement, for which, gratitude was owed to President Asad. In another national improvement, including the Alawite region, piped drinking water was available to fifty four percent of the rural population by 1980, a 'luxury' that was almost nonexistent in the Alawite region thirty years previously.[186]

Perhaps the most radical development by the 1980s was the construction of roads connecting up to five hundred villages in the Alawite region.[187] This was no minor achievement considering the nature of the terrain. Although few ordinary Alawites possess motor vehicles, many mini-buses traverse the roads linking the

---

[182] Ibid. p. 63; Xavier de Planhol, pp. 89-91.

[183] Ibid. 1999, p. 66.

[184] Ibid. 1999, p. 66.

[185] Ibid. 1999, p. 63.

[186] Ibid. p. 66.

[187] Batatu, 1999, p. 69; In 1960 Nevill Barbour noted that the roads into the Jabal Sahiliyah were little more than rough dirt tracks, see 'Impressions of the United Arab Republic,' *International Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 1, (Jan., 1960), p. 28.

Alawite region, providing transport to residents at extremely low cost. The impact was significant, effectively ending the historic discontinuity among the various parts, and tribes, of the Jabal Sahiliyah. A useful comparison can be made to the policy of Maronite Lebanese President Fuad Shihab in the 1950s. Shihab promoted construction of new roads connecting the Maronite mountain districts as a way of enhancing Christian cohesion. For Shihab, the objective was a contingency plan in the event of the failure of the multi-confessional political project in Lebanon.[188] For Asad, increased connectivity among Alawites could only strengthen his power base, but was also part of the overall Ba'athist ideology of improving the lot of the peasant classes.

Increased Alawite access to education was another product of Hafiz al-Asad's period of rule. According to Batatu, the number of rural primary schools in Syria more than doubled from 3,000 in 1963 to 6,302 in 1980, and rural primary school graduations increased from 3.7 percent in 1963 to 27.9 percent by 1991.[189] These figures suggest that Hafiz al-Asad's regime was a greater catalyst for the educational improvements for Alawites than either Article 8 of the French Mandate or the American Missionaries.

An important means of Alawite advancement under Hafiz al-Asad's rule was the establishment of informal patronage networks.[190] In the 1970s Alawite barons linked to the regime and (often) involved in the lucrative smuggling trade, distributed proceeds to members of their tribes lacking direct access to financial resources.[191] These patronage networks bound Alawites to their particular benefactor and the Asad Dynasty. Ghazi Kana'an from the Kalbiyya tribe, for example, operated like a "feudal lord" to his home village of B'hamra, and its

---

[188] William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Chapter 5 in draft manuscript (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2012).

[189] Batatu, 1999, p. 71.

[190] See Steven Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: the Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004).

[191] Tejel, 2009, p. 68.

surrounds distributing favours in return for loyalty. Kana'an personally provided for the construction of a library and a community centre for the area. [192] These were some of the first infrastructural developments in villages like B'hamra since the American missionaries built schools in the 1850s and 1860s.

Although general improvements in Alawite living conditions should not be understated, improvement in living standards for the wider Alawite community were far from equal. Variation in prosperity and development occurred between the tribal groupings of the Alawite region. The development of Hafiz al-Asad's hometown of Qurdaha, in particular, warrants special attention, in comparison to other Alawite towns and villages.

Qurdaha lies in the foothills of the Jabal Sahiliyah approximately twenty kilometres south east of Latakia. In 1986, ten years after Hafiz al-Asad stood in the "dusty main street" of his run down home town, a *New York Times* correspondent visited Qurdaha and observed a new four lane highway leading into the town and "the flush of construction and prosperity."[193] The Asad 'Palace' was located in the town behind high yellow walls guarded by elite troops.

The construction of an international airport less than ten kilometres from Qurdaha is another point of interest. The international airport at Aleppo could easily service the North West part of the country. But having an air terminal, no doubt, provides a useful service to the Asad elite for shuttling between Damascus and Qurdaha (or Latakia), but perhaps also, a vital escape route out of the country for regime personnel, should a dangerous security situation arise. Along with a major port at Latakia, the Alawite region was developing a reasonable level of infrastructure that could support an independent state if necessary. Whether this was a primary objective of Hafiz al-Asad is debatable, but surely it was given some thought as a worst case scenario. The development of port facilities at

---

[192] Anthony Shadid, 'Death of Syrian Minister leaves Sect adrift in Time of Strife,' *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

[193] John Kifner, 'Syrian Success Story: A Hated Minority Sect becomes the Ruling Class, *New York Times*, December 26, 1986 .

Jounieh in Lebanon is comparable as an example of the Maronites seeking an independent outlet for external relations without necessarily planning for actual secession.[194]

Perhaps the most telling insight about Qurdaha in 1986 was the *New York Times* correspondent's observation about the contrast between 'bent over toothless old men, with worn, shabby peasant clothes,' and the healthy well heeled young men in uniform. To him, this was a palpable indication of the speed of the Alawite political transformation, or as a western diplomat put it at the time: "from underclass to ruling class in a single generation."[195] To extrapolate Qurdaha's prosperity to the whole Alawite sect, as suggested here, is a mistake. Wealth was certainly not distributed evenly and there remains a clear separation between those Alawites close to the Asad dynasty, and those not.

In many Alawite villages people still evince the physical signs of poverty and hardship supposedly left behind over two decades before. In one Alawite village visited by this writer, well removed according to geography and kinship from Asad's Kalbiyya tribe, living conditions are very basic. Electricity is available but not every house is connected, water for many houses is still taken from a well and the main mode of transport is donkeys, mules and mini buses arriving from Latakia.[196] Yet the inhabitants of this village too, played their part in the maintenance of the Asad dynasty. An elderly woman, who would fit the above stereotype of hardship, proudly recounted how her deceased husband was in the army for many years under Hafiz al-Asad. And men, who work both in Latakia and in the village, reverently took turns practicing the elaborate signature of *al-*

---

[194] William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Chapter 5 in draft manuscript, (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2012).

[195] *New York Times*, December 26, 1982.

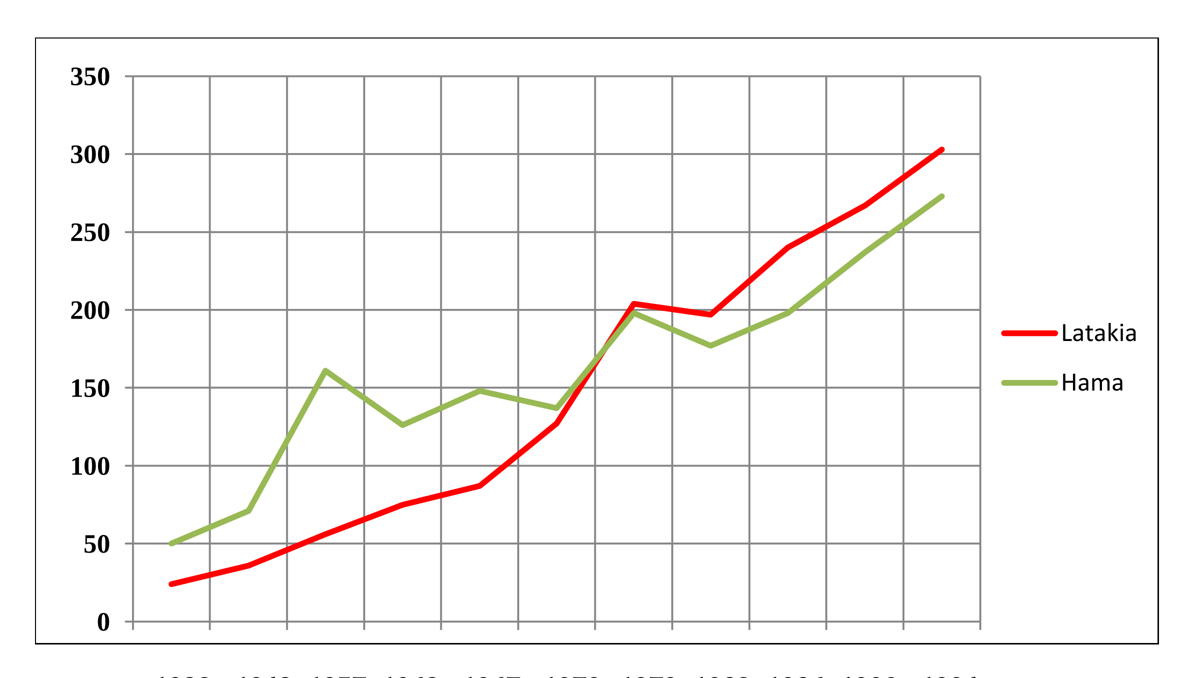
[196] As outlined in the methodology, throughout this work careful attention to the maintenance of complete anonymity has been taken. The names of specific villages are, thus, not given, in order to protect the identities of those who provided gratefully received information.

ra'īs (the President – at that time, Bashar al-Asad). All the while, ironically, the most frequent topic of conversation was *masāri* (money) and the lack of it.

Latakia – An Alawite City

The demographic evolution of Latakia in the middle decades of the twentieth century tells an important story about the impact of the Asad dynasty. A comparison of the provincial cities of Latakia and Hama from the mandate period up to the 1990s demonstrates how increased Alawite urban migration corresponds to the period of Asad rule (see Figure 8).[197] During the mandate period Latakia was half the size of Hama, and very much a backwater of Syria with a population of only 24,000 in 1932. Conversely Hama was easily the fourth largest Syrian city at 50,000 and a thriving commercial centre dominated by wealthy Sunni landowning families.

Figure 8. Comparative Populations of Latakia and Hama 1932 – 1994 (in thousands)



Data Source: Winckler (1999), p.72

[197] Olsson, 1998, p. 182.

At the same stage the majority of Latakia was also still Sunni Muslim;[198] this would change over the next decades as Alawites left the mountain in search of opportunity. In the early years of Syrian independence, rural migrants headed east towards the larger cities like Hama and Homs. Akram Hawrani and his Arab Socialist Party (discussed in chapter three), was a major factor in this process. Thus, the population of Hama surged between 1943 and 1957, more than tripling in size to 161,000.[199] Latakia's population in the same period maintained only a steady increase due mainly to natural increase and some minor immigration. Although during the French mandate, Alawites technically had their own autonomous state with Latakia as its capital, this had not precipitated significant Alawite migration to this city.

The mid-1960s were a turning point in the demographic trajectory of Latakia. The 1966 coup greatly increased the influence of Alawites such as Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad in the Ba'ath party. Subsequently, the influence and prevalence of Alawites in the Ba'ath ranks contributed to an inflow of Alawites into Latakia. The rate of immigration into Latakia accelerated again after the ascension to power of Hafiz al-Asad in 1970 to the point that by 1979 Latakia had surpassed Hama in population. From that point on Latakia assumed the mantle of Syria's fourth city with an undoubted Alawite majority. Even with a high rate of natural increase among Latakia's 1932 population of 24,000[200] (which would already have included reasonable minorities of Christians and Alawites); the subsequent population explosion could not have been achieved. The major factor in Latakia's growth to 204,000 by 1979[201] must therefore have been in-migration. There is no evidence of great numbers of Sunnis or other communities migrating

---

[198] Seale, 1988, p. 11.

[199] Onn Winckler, *Demographic Developments and Population Policies in Ba'thist Syria*, Brighton & Portland Sussex Academic Press, 1999, pp. 62, 72, table 3.4, main sources cited include: Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Syria*, 1943; *The Middle East and North Africa*, 1953 – 1965/66; UN Demographic Yearbook 1963 – 1994.

[200] Winckler, 1999, p. 72.

[201] Ibid.

to Latakia, thus it is logical to deduct that Alawites were, through in-migration from the Jabal Sahiliyah, the major community of Latakia by 1979.

The brief decrease in population of both Latakia and Hama between 1979 and 1982 coincides with the period of most heightened tension in Syria's internal struggles. In Latakia the decrease was only 7,000 and was possibly due to Alawites returning, (or sending their families) to their villages for safety reasons as mentioned previously. The sudden decrease in Hama's population from 198,000 in 1979, to 177,000 in 1982,[202] could be explained by the Hama rebellion and (chillingly) corroborates estimates of around twenty thousand fatalities.[203]

There are some significant political implications of Latakia's transformation from a moderate sized town with a Sunni majority to a large metropolitan city with an Alawite majority (see figure 9 overleaf). For the first time in Alawite history, in a major change from their scattered distribution, the community had its own metropolitan core, a hub providing the Alawite community with a centre of social and political gravity. Another important aspect is the fact that Latakia belongs to no particular tribe; therefore it acts as a 'mixing pot' for formerly disparate Alawite tribes, improving community cohesion.

Latakia has a very different atmosphere to other Syrian cities, with the exception of perhaps Tartous (which has large Alawite and Christian populations). This was especially evident during field research by this writer conducted during the month of Ramadan in 2009.[204] There are noticeably fewer symbols commonly associated with an 'Islamic City,' women do not generally wear headscarves, cafes remain well attended in daylight hours through Ramadan, and shops in *Sharia Amerikia* (American Street) unashamedly mimic western styles and tastes.

---

[202] Ibid. For these statistics Winckler cites estimates from the UN Demographic Yearbooks, (1981, p.279; 1984, p. 272).

[203] 'War of Succession,' *New York Times*, May 17, 1984.

[204] Ramadan is the month of fasting and religious celebration for Muslims.

Figure 9. Central Latakia City (facing north)



Source: the author, 2009

The original Sunni Muslim population (predominant since the Crusader departure in the thirteenth century) are conspicuous by their different dress and concentration in the central old quarter of the city. Excluding the Israeli cities, Latakia is quite possibly unique in the Middle East, as a major city without a majority orthodox Muslim population (Sunni *or* Shi'a), a situation unknown since the devastation of Asia Minor's Christian communities in the fourteenth century.[205] The only possible exceptions are the much smaller cities of Tartous ninety kilometres to the south of Latakia, Suwayda in south west Syria, which is mostly inhabited by Druze, the Christian city of Zahle in Lebanon and the city of Suwaydiyya near Antakya in Turkey.[206]

---

[205] Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), pp. 132-138.

[206] Tartous: population 52,589 (1981 census), primarily Alawites and Christians; Suwayda: 43,414 (1981 census); Zahle: 54, 129 (2010, est.) data source: *World Gazetteer*, 'Syria'; According to local residents Suweydiya is ninety percent Alawite.

The other major urbanization of Alawites involved Damascus. The more religiously conservative cities of Aleppo, Hama and Homs were not as conducive to Alawite settlement, although some Alawite communities built up on their outskirts.[207] Damascus was the centre of bureaucratic and military administration, which employed many Alawites; hence newly arrived rural Alawites comprised a significant presence in Damascus by the early 1970s. In September 1980 the regime revealed plans for the residential development of parts of Jabal Qassioun in the North West of Damascus.[208] Of course no information related to these plans suggested that the new residential zone would be reserved for Alawites. It is clear, however, that the area now colloquially known as *Ashir Warwar* (the Bird's Nest) is populated principally by Alawites, a great many of whom are retired military personnel.[209] The residents of the *Ashir Warwar* seem to enjoy immunity from government building regulations and interference,[210] an indication of the special relationship between the Asad regime and its key support base. The location of this Alawite settlement is significant for two reasons: it is a very steep incline that, in the event of a civil upheaval, would enjoy strategic advantages against attacks, and being to the north-west, it allows a clear line of retreat towards the Alawite region, or if necessary, into Lebanon. Overall therefore, it was a tentative shift into Damascus by Alawites who, never comfortable in the 'Islamic cities' of the interior, were mindful to keep exit strategies.

There is a very important caveat to this process of Alawite urbanization. Despite Alawites assuming primacy in Latakia, strong links are maintained to home villages and tribal areas. The proximity of the Jabal Sahiliyah, and access to frequent and cheap transport, means that it is possible for Alawites to live in their home village and work in Latakia. Many families maintain dwellings in both their

---

[207] For example, the district of Nozha in Homs has been primarily Alawite since the 1980s.

[208] 'Kassioun, Syria,' *The Times*, London, September 5, 1980.

[209] David Rain, 'Damascus: A Geographical Field Note,' *Geographical Review;* January 2009, Vol. 99, No. 1, New York, p. 102.

[210] Ibid.

villages and the city. Thus, the majority of Alawites preserve a strongly rural lifestyle and outlook.[211] Their attachment to the natural environment, cultivated throughout centuries of isolation, was obvious to this writer during visits to the Jabal Sahiliyah. Alawite companions were noticeably more relaxed and comfortable in their villages than the city.

So how did social change experienced by Alawites affect their relations with the Asad regime? A major component of Ibn Khaldun's theory for the decline of 'asabiyya was that as a group becomes urbanised it is 'corrupted' by luxuries and wealth and solidarity diminishes;[212] thus, "their group feeling and courage decrease in the next generations."[213] In the case of the tribal/clan 'asabiyya of the inner circle of the regime this was possibly true and will be discussed fully below. In the case of the broader Alawite group this certainly was not the case. First, for most Alawites there was only a partial urbanization, which in itself showed the continued insecurity of the group. But, moreover, it meant that the group retained its rural outlook and characteristics. So a decline in 'asabiyya due to urbanization was not at all a certainty for most Alawites. During field work in 2009 a comment by an Alawite acquaintance, who lives and works between a poor part of Latakia and his home village in the Jabal Sahiliyah, summed up the lack of 'luxury' when he despondently told this writer as we sat at a cafe, "*ana fuqeer leyun*" (I'm poor Leon). Yet this same individual is staunchly supportive of the Asad dynasty.

In the 1980s, the socio-economic improvements noted above, Ba'athist land reform and government subsidies meant that, while still rural, Alawites were relatively better off. There is therefore, no reason to suspect, according to a Khaldunian assessment, that the level of 'asabiyya among the wider Alawite group was in serious danger of decline in the first decades of Asad rule. Overall their lives were much improved, without coming anywhere near decadent luxury.

---

[211] Olsson, 1998, p. 168.

[212] Lacoste, 1984, p. 100.

[213] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 109.

National socio-economic trends under Hafiz al-Asad

Beginning in the 1970s, Syria's population grew at an unprecedented rate, even by Middle Eastern standards. Between 1970 and 1990 Syria's population doubled from 6.4 million to 12.8 million.[214] At first Hafiz al-Asad was not overly perturbed by this population explosion and saw it as quantitatively strengthening the country against the Israeli enemy as part of his pursuit of 'strategic parity.'[215] In addition the proceeds of the "oil boom" of the 1970s helped to ameliorate the negative effects of population growth.[216] However, by the end of the 1980s, with the Syrian economy and infrastructure in a poor state the greatly expanded population began to pose a serious dilemma for the regime. Nonetheless, Hafiz al-Asad failed to implement anti-natalist policies to try and lower the rampant population growth. In a comprehensive study of Middle East demography, Onn Winckler could not "find any expression of Hafiz al-Asad [...] or any other senior official publicly advocating a family planning program."[217] Such a policy could have been seen as un-Islamic, which could have sparked a renewed wave of religious antipathy for the 'Alawite' nature of the regime. Instead Asad adopted an indirect approach by setting up voluntary clinics but kept a safe distance from any potentially unpopular policy to do with family planning.[218] The lack of definitive action to combat rapid population growth has led to severe socio-economic and environmental challenges, which rank amongst the most serious facing Syria in the twenty first century.

In education and religion the regime promoted a syllabus based on Ba'athist Syrian and Arab nationalism and a homogenised version of Islam.

---

[214] Rivlin, 2009, p. 240.

[215] On Hafiz al-Asad's aspiration for strategic parity with Israel see: Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy* (London: C. Hurst, 2001), p. 13.

[216] Winckler, 2009, p. 407.

[217] Winckler, 2009, p. 191.

[218] In 1974 Hafiz al-Asad established the 'Syrian Family Planning Association' as a voluntary Non-government organisation, Winckler, 2009, p. 191.

Monique Cardinal notes how Syrian classrooms during the 1990s did not even discuss the two main Sunni and Shi'a Islamic branches, let alone the Alawites and other unorthodox sects.[219] This refusal to allow discussion of Syria's diverse religious makeup was intended to create a new generation of Syrians who were non-sectarian in their social and political ideas. Norwegian researcher Torstein Worren has suggested however, that this institutionalised lack of knowledge about different sects promotes distrust and suspicion of the 'other' in Syrian society. To navigate this social undercurrent of distrust, Syrians developed techniques to discover people's sectarian affiliation indirectly by asking after family names and areas of origin.[220] Alawites are also recognisable by their pronunciation of the consonant ق (qaf), transliterated as a Q in English, which has become a glottal stop among most other Levantine Arabic speakers.[221]

Rather than promoting the inclusion of Alawites in Syrian society the education policy pursued by Hafiz al-Asad actually served to maintain the alienation of Alawites. Historically the Alawites were feared and mistrusted by orthodox Sunni Muslims because of their ambiguous religious identity, thus, the prohibition on discussing the differences (and similarities) between sects in the modern period only served to continue ill informed perceptions. This sentiment was voiced in a declaration by Alawite religious leaders near the start of Asad rule in 1973:

> The factor contributing most to divisions among people [...] is that they are wanting in knowledge of the facts about one another [...] no society is free of alien deviations and a concomitant susceptibility to abuse [...] diseased souls are still

[219] Monique Cardinal, 'Religious Education in Syria: Unity and Difference,' *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol.31, No.2, 2009, pp. 97-98.

[220] Torstein Schiøtz Worren, 'Fear and Resistance: 'The Construction of Alawi Identity in Syria,' Master Thesis, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, February 2007.

[221] The Druze share this characteristic.

> burrowing in the past and reiterating inventions by the enemies of Arabism and Islam [...][222]

The policy pursued by Hafiz al-Asad of submerging Alawite identity seems to oppose this appeal by Alawite leaders for improved inter-faith dialogue. One outcome of sustained Alawite alienation and insecurity was however, the preservation of Alawite ‘asabiyya for the Asad regime.

Struggle for the Asad Dynasty

Although there is no evidence suggesting that Alawite sectarian ‘asabiyya was declining by the 1980s, in 1983-1984 a serious crack occurred in the ‘asabiyya of the Asad clan. In November 1983 Hafiz al-Asad, who had obviously come through a very difficult period personally, became acutely ill with heart problems.[223] Asad’s younger brother Rifa’at immediately took steps to make certain that political power fell to him in the event of his brother’s demise. As the regime elite came to the hospital to visit the President, Rifa’at reportedly told them, “Why don’t we use our meetings here to deliberate on who will succeed [Hafiz al-Asad]? [...] I do not believe that you will prefer another man to me.”[224]

It is not entirely certain what Hafiz al-Asad planned for his brother in terms of the succession. According to then foreign minister, and key adviser Abd al-Halim Khaddam:

> [...] when [Hafiz] first had his illness, his main concern was to have his brother be president after him. When his brother saw that Hafiz was sick he rushed to control the country before his brother died [...] this was when all the problems began. They all stood – they opposed Rifa’at and they protected Hafiz.[225]

[222] Cited in Batatu, 1999, p. 20.

[223] Alasdair Drysdale, ‘The Asad Regime and Its Troubles,’ *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), p. 247.

[224] Batatu 1999, pp. 232-233.

[225] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with this author, Paris September 16, 2009.

It is apparent that many Alawites viewed Rifa'at al-Asad negatively. He had, of course, been instrumental in the preservation of Asad rule by ruthlessly pursuing the Muslim Brotherhood and supervising their final defeat at Hama. To an extent therefore, Alawites owed their position after 1982 to Rifa'at.[226] It was his ruthless tactics and open corruption, however, that now made him a liability to the continued security of the Alawite community. Rifa'at's poor public image was potentially very damaging to long term regime maintenance. Key Alawite supporters of the regime recognized this fact and strongly opposed Rifa'at's bid for the presidency.

The intra-Alawite struggle that broke out over the following months was the first obvious sign of a serious rift in Alawite solidarity, possibly more dangerous to the Asad regime than the assault of the Muslim Brothers. The first indications of the struggle were posters of Rifa'at al-Asad that appeared around Damascus in February 1984.[227] The posters were quickly pulled down or covered up with posters of Hafiz al-Asad by Republican Guardsmen and Internal Security Agents.[228] By February 27 tensions had escalated to the point that a military standoff took place in Damascus between Rifa'at's Defense Companies and the units of Alawite generals Ali Haydar, Shafiq Fayyad and Adnan Makhlouf and shots were even reported near the Presidential Palace.[229]

The struggle between Hafiz al-Asad and his brother threatened to open Syria up to external interference as Rifa'at sought external allies in his attempt to seize power. Notably, the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, who was an ally of Rifa'at al-Asad, visited Damascus in late February 1984.[230] Rifa'at al-Asad's

---

[226] Seale, 1988, p. 425.

[227] *New York Times*, March 6, 1984; Drysdale, 1982, p.247; Seale, 1988, p.427; Batatu, 1999, p. 234.

[228] Batatu, 1999, p. 234.

[229] *New York Times*, March 6, 1984; Drysdale, 1982, p. 249; Batatu, 1999, p. 234.

[230] Goodarzi, 2006, pp.110-111; Ironically at this moment of Asad dynasty weakness the Lebanese President Amin Gemayal travelled to Damascus in early March to restore normal relations with Syria, *New York*

association with the Saudi monarchy would likely have been viewed with concern in the Jabal Sahiliyah. The *Wahhabi* school of Islam practiced by the Saudis is considered hostile by Alawites, being largely derived from the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya. Shaykh 'Ali Yeral explained Alawite unease about *Wahhabi* intolerance to this writer in 2011:

> The Wahhabis don't like anyone, we hope from God that [their] wrong and hypocritical ideas [...] will change and disappear [...] they hate Iran, the Shi'ites, Syria, Hizballah, the Alawites, they don't like anyone.[231]

By forging an external alliance with the Saudis in his bid to succeed his brother in early 1984, Rifa'at al-Asad threatened to undermine Alawite 'asabiyya. A recovering Hafiz al-Asad moved to defuse this situation, potentially ruinous to his regime. On March 11, Asad appointed three vice presidents, including Rifa'at, the Sunni foreign minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam plus another Sunni, Zuhayr Mashariqah, undersecretary of the Ba'ath Party Regional Command.[232] This was a way of appeasing his brother Rifa'at and maybe lessening the intra-Alawite appearance of the power struggle.[233] Asad also hoped to "buy some time" to allow the situation to settle down.[234]

These efforts were in vain however, and on March 30, 1984, the crisis came to a head. Rifa'at seemed intent on capturing power and ordered his troops to block the entrances to Damascus and move on the capital in force. Alawite commanders Shafiq Fayyad and Ali Haydar once again engaged in armed

---

Times, March 6, 1984; The major cause of poor Lebanese-Syrian relations was the assassination of Lebanon's president elect, Bashir Gemayal in Beirut on September 14, 1982, in all likelihood by Syrian proxies, Seale, 1988, p.420; Goodarzi, 2006, p.75.

[231] Shaykh 'Ali Yeral, interview, March 28, 2011, Antakya

[232] Drysdale, 1982, p.249; 'War of Succession,' *New York Times*, May 17, 1984

[233] It is possible that Hafiz al-Asad, in his poor health, considered preparing a return to previous arrangements whereby a Sunni figure head would assume the presidency while Alawite military officials controlled real power behind the scenes.

[234] Drysdale, 1982, p. 250

confrontations with Rifa'at's Defense Companies and bloodshed seemed inevitable.[235] President Asad determined to deal with his brother personally, and once and for all. According to Hanna Batatu, Hafiz al-Asad told his brother in no uncertain terms, "I am all out of patience with you […] If you do not abide with what I tell you and comply with my orders, I will send you to your death and will have dirges sung over you."[236] Patrick Seale's version contends that Hafiz al-Asad, undefended, confronted his brother at Rifa'at's residence in front of their mother and challenged him to act, saying: "Here I am. I *am* the regime."[237] Either way Rifa'at, who knew by this point that the Alawite power brokers, whom he had been trying lobby to his cause, were aligned against him, yielded to his brothers demands and stood down his Defense Companies.[238]

When further outbreaks of intra-Alawite violence broke out in Latakia in May 1984, Hafiz al-Asad became convinced that the only way to preserve the regime and Alawite solidarity was to exile his brother.[239] Initially all three main Alawite antagonists, Rifa'at, Ali Haydar and Shafiq Fayyad were sent to the Soviet Union in late May.[240] This was possibly a reminder to Alawites that Hafiz al-Asad was firmly in control at the head of the Asad dynasty and would not tolerate other centres of power regardless of their allegiance. Haydar and Fayyad were, however, allowed to return while by September 1984, Rifa'at was permanently exiled.[241] The struggle for the Asad dynasty was over and 'asabiyya among the Alawite elite remained intact.

Rifa'at al-Asad had commanded loyalty from his Defence Companies and the Lebanese ADP, along with political support from the Saudi monarchy and

[235] *New York Times*, May 17, 1984; Drysdale, p.250; Seale, 1988, p.432

[236] Cited in Batatu, 1999, p. 236.

[237] Seale,1988, p. 433.

[238] Batatu, 1999, p.236; Eyal Zisser, 'The Syrian Army: Between the Domestic and External Fronts,' *MERIA*, Vol.5, No.1, March 2001, p. 5.

[239] Drysdale, 1982, p. 250.

[240] 'Assad's Brother Exiled 'Forever,' Syrian Declares,' *New York Times*, September 12, 1984.

[241] *New York Times*, September 12, 1984.

possibly even the Americans. He did not however, possess the necessary influence to steer Alawite ʻasabiyya to his political advantage. In a rare reference to the role of the traditional Alawite leadership on Syrian politics, Hanna Batatu observed from rumours circulating Damascus in 1984 that "[Hafiz] al-Asad was abetted by the sages of the Alawi community who [...] perceived Rifa'at as a threat to the survival of the regime as a whole."[242] This assistance was evident in the Murshidi Alawite shaykhs' order to their followers to abandon Rifa'at's Defense Companies.[243] At this time, the only effective means of controlling the country was command of Alawite ʻasabiyya, and it was clearly demonstrated that Hafiz al-Asad retained the confidence of the majority of the Alawite community.

Alawite loyalty to Hafiz al-Asad during the succession crisis demonstrates two key elements of the Alawite-Asad ʻasabiyya by the mid 1980s. Firstly, Alawite tribal and military leaders firmly attached the sect's interests to the survival of the Asad regime, which they felt Rifa'at endangered. Secondly, how the community apportioned its loyalty was in fact dependent on what they viewed as regime policy decisions beneficial to Alawites. It was not simply a case of unquestioningly supporting the Asad regime but rather, who could best serve the interests of the community. Clearly the policy directions promoted by Rifa'at were not seen as desirable. By evaluating Rifa'at al-Asad's political outlook it may therefore be possible to comment on the general political outlook of Alawites in the mid 1980s.

In domestic affairs Rifa'at endorsed a more right wing policy. His preference was for a more capitalist economy,[244] which won him supporters among those who advocated for economic liberalization.[245] Ironically, these would

---

[242] Batatu, 1999, p.236.

[243] James Quinlivan, 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,' *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Autumn, 1999), p. 148.

[244] For example, "[t]alking to supporters in a lunch at the Damascus Sheraton, [Rifa'at al-Asad] said he favoured a more liberal economic policy...," *New York Times*, May 17, 1984.

[245] Drysdale, 1982, p. 255.

include Sunni merchants, the class that gave rise to the Muslim Brothers, whom Rifa'at had been instrumental in destroying. Nonetheless it seemed most ordinary Alawites preferred the retention of the leftist social policy pursued by Hafiz al-Asad.

Rifa'at's political ideology can be seen in his founding of the *al-Rabitah* (the Association of Higher Education Diploma Holders). Rifa'at himself held a doctorate from Moscow University.[246] The Association however, took the form of a 'quasi-political party' which advocated an elitist approach to politics.[247] This was in complete contradiction of Ba'athist doctrine that expounded the virtues of the peasants and the masses. Although Alawite elites enjoyed privileged educational opportunities, the majority of Alawites, who were still rural peasants, identified with the Ba'athist ideology championed by Hafiz al-Asad. This was a good example of Ibn Khaldun's concept that "...propaganda gives a dynasty at its beginning another power in addition to that of the group feeling..."[248]

In foreign policy, Rifa'at openly advocated a shift towards the West. He made overtures to the United States and developed close links with the Saudi monarchy. Moreover, Rifa'at had "serious reservations about the alliance with Iran"[249]and openly opposed unity talks with Iraq.[250] Once again Rifa'at's politics seemed to directly contradict what could be considered core Alawite interests. In religion, Shi'ite Iran was a natural ally of the Alawites, whereas Saudi Arabia represented the heart of Wahhabi-Sunni fundamentalism.[251] A move towards the United States would also imperil Soviet and Iranian support to the Asad dynasty. In addition, Iraqi unity talks bolstered the appearance of regime commitment to

---

[246] Batatu, 1999, Appendix.

[247] Ibid. p. 252.

[248] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 126.

[249] Goodarzi, 2006, p. 6.

[250] Ibid. 1999, p. 18.

[251] These Alawite preferences were reinforced by the Alawite Shaykhs 'Ali Yeral and Nasir Eskiocak in 2011.

the ideals of Ba'athism and pan-Arabism, which remained the best available mainstay of domestic legitimacy for the Asad regime.

Rifa'at al-Asad's blunt approach to asserting Alawite particularism was also potentially dangerous as it went against the community's long history of dissimulation. His popularity among the more militant Lebanese Alawites reflects this aspect of his approach. The political situation in Lebanon was very different for Alawites however. In Lebanon the community was one of a number of diverse communities; whereas in Syria the Alawites were on a political limb facing a hostile majority; a situation especially pronounced in the wake of Hama. Syrian Alawites therefore veered towards taqiyya and a homogenous Arab identity.

Lastly, Rifa'at al-Asad, like Ismail Khayr Bey in the 1850s, took full advantage of his influential position to enrich himself and his followers. He accumulated a vast fortune by monopolising the smuggling trade and the "military-commercial complex" established between military elites and Damascene merchants.[252] As such, he became an open symbol of the nepotism, corruption and immoral hedonism that regime critics railed against. Rifa'at could thus perhaps be categorized within Ibn Khaldun's definition of corruption caused through the luxuries bought by power. Patrick Seale describes how Rifa'at "travelled abroad, explored foreign capitals [and] acquired a taste for Western luxuries [...]"[253] Conversely, Hafiz al-Asad lived a fairly moderate lifestyle and kept himself firmly rooted in the realities of Syrian and Alawite politics.

Based on the negative response by most Alawite military and religious leaders to Rifa'at al-Asad's leadership bid in the mid 1980s, it seems Alawites inclined towards: socialist economics, the Iranian and Soviet alliances, an inconspicuous Alawite national identity, and modesty in presenting the material

[252] Drysdale, 1982, pp. 247-248

[253] Seale, 1988, p. 319

trappings of power.[254] The key to maintaining Alawite 'asabiyya was therefore, found in abiding by these principles - which is what Hafiz al-Asad did. While Hafiz al-Asad possessed all the political power of a monarch he was careful never to overtly give that appearance usually appearing in civilian attire and careful to use only Ba'athist references to his position and role in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Maintaining External Threats

According to Ibn Khaldun, "in order to maintain at least an appearance of solidarity, the tribe is drawn into conflict with other groups [which] ... foster[s] a feeling of unity."[255] While 'enemies' menace the borders of the state, the dynasty's group remains firm and cohesive in their support of their leader. For Hafiz al-Asad Israel provided this function very well. Although the Syrian regime doubtless felt threatened by the Israelis at times, overall a *Modus-Vivendi* existed where the two states perceived mutual utility in avoiding direct confrontation. Similarly to George Orwell's novel *1984*,[256] the Asad regime justified Syria's weak economy, poor infrastructure, ever-present surveillance of its own population and narrow legitimacy by the constant war footing.[257] In the Arab world, being a 'frontline' state in the confrontation with Israel was also a reasonable source of aid revenue[258] (or 'strategic rent') and legitimacy for Asad's regime.[259] Conversely the Israelis, rightly or wrongly, preferred 'secular Alawite rule' to a possible fundamentalist Islamist alternative. The Israelis were possibly not altogether

[254] A noteworthy exception to this general tendency of Alawites was the al-Murtada Association founded by Hafiz al-Asad's brother Jamil in 1981. They espoused right wing Alawite nationalism and even tried to 'Alawise' (convert) rural Beduins. Hafiz al-Asad closed it down in 1983. See Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 4th ed. (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2011), p. 122.

[255] See Lacoste, 1984, p. 108

[256] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty Four,* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).

[257] Moshe Maoz, *Syria and Israel*, *From War to Peace-making* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 88.

[258] Ted Morgan, 'The wild men become a nation, *'New York Times*, May 18, 1975 , p. 80.

[259] Naomi Shepherd, 'Mr Assad's Demands Are More Than He Can Get,' *New York Times,* September 7, 1975.

displeased to witness the Syrian regime liquidating a portion of the Sunni Islamist movement in 1982.

To emphasise the Israeli threat, Hafiz al-Asad decided not to rebuild the city of Quinetra on the Golan Heights destroyed in the 1973 war with the Israelis, but rather to build a new town.[260] The ruins of Quinetra remain untouched and hold great propaganda value as a reminder of Israeli aggression; visitors are encouraged to go there. The constant Israeli threat also provides a distraction from the Asad regime's narrow legitimacy. State newspapers, almost daily, printed stories about atrocities against Syrian 'patriots' by the Israeli occupiers in the Golan.[261]

By the mid-1990s there was heightened optimism (in the West) for a successful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. At this time Hafiz al-Asad discussed with Abd al-Halim Khaddam issues related to the peace process. Khaddam related to this writer three key points that arose in those discussions that negated any chance of the Syrian regime concluding a peace treaty with Israel:

- It would necessitate the lifting of the martial law, which would possibly endanger the regime.
- Because the President was from a minority, the agreement would be seen as an 'Alawite agreement.'
- Hafiz al-Asad's unwillingness to sit with the Israelis based on his mindset developed since childhood.[262]

Because of these factors, according to Khaddam, Hafiz al-Asad's policy was to maintain a situation of 'no peace- no war.'[263] In other words, avoid signing a peace

[260] 'The new town going up on Syria's 'front line,' *The Times*, London November 16, 1981.

[261] For examples and discussion of this, see: Mordechai Kedar, *Asad in Search of Legitimacy: Message and Rhetoric in the Syrian Press under Hafiz and Bashar* (UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), p. 27.

[262] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, Paris, September, 2009.

[263] Ibid.

deal, but also avoid any direct confrontation with the Israelis. The points, listed above, hold important implications about the relevance of Alawite-Asad 'asabiyya to the Arab-Israeli issue.

Syrian emergency laws, first enacted after the Ba'ath revolution in 1963, became more important in the wake of the Hama rebellion. The Mukhabarat came to rely on this legal mechanism to crack down on any potential for recurrence of the troubles of 1976-1982. The official pretext for martial law was however, the ongoing war with Israel. Hence, as stated by Hafiz al-Asad to Khaddam: if a peace was signed with Israel the laws would have to be lifted. For if they remained in place, it would become glaringly obvious that the main reason for the laws was the security of the Asad regime and the Alawite community against internal, rather than external, threats.[264] Looking ahead for a moment, the rapid lifting of the 'state of emergency' as a concession to Syrian protesters in 2011 puts into doubt how important these laws really were.[265] Nevertheless, when the security forces continued to use arbitrary force in 2011 after the lifting of the state of emergency, the legitimacy of the regime among the population was only further eroded.

Hafiz al-Asad's second reason for not signing a peace treaty - "the agreement would be seen as an Alawite agreement" - shows how conscious he was that his rule was still associated with his community of origin. Asad had invested significant political capital into lifting Alawite status in the Arab-Muslim sphere through Syria's 'steadfast' struggle against the Israeli-Zionist occupation of Arab lands. Similarly to previous accusations of treachery levelled against Alawites by Mamluk or Ottoman authorities and Arab nationalists, a peace deal with the Israelis would be construed as an Alawite betrayal of Muslim and/or

---

[264] Former Lebanese Foreign Minister, Elie Salem, conjectured that the Emergency Laws were not such a high priority, interview with this author. This view was supported with the quick dispensing of the Emergency Laws by the Asad dynasty in 2011, which brought no real change in security policy. See *Financial Times*, March 27, 2011.

[265] 'Assad to lift state of emergency,' *BBC News*, April 20, 2011.

Arab causes. This would have seriously undermined Alawite attempts to shift towards political security within the Arab majority and could, in fact, have precipitated a far broader and more dangerous backlash, especially if it came with a renewed wave of religious intolerance.

A lesson about potential consequences of dealing with the Israelis was the Lebanese Christian political overture to the Israelis in the early 1980s under the leadership of Bashir Gemayal. The Christians very quickly found themselves politically isolated in the Arab world,[266] and Gemayal paid the ultimate price when he was assassinated in a Beirut bombing. Ironically, it was very likely the Syrian regime that organized Gemayal's demise.[267] In a similar vein, the Egyptian peace with the Israelis undoubtedly cost President Anwar Sadat his life. But because Sadat was a member of the majority Sunni Arab community, his 'betrayal' did not extend to a particular minority.

The final observation by Khaddam listed above concerns Hafiz al-Asad's mindset and contrasts the pragmatic nature of the first two points. Asad, like other Alawites of his era, was not divorced from the political atmosphere of the times. Hatred for the Israelis and their occupation of the Palestinian lands was not the exclusive domain of the Sunni Arab majority but is a sentiment broadly held by Alawites. This was evident during numerous conversations by this writer with Alawites in the Jabal Sahiliyah.

Alawites faced a dilemma, however. Success in the pursuit of 'Arab-Muslim causes,' namely justice for the Palestinians and a fair peace in the Middle East, could see their 'Faustian bargain' with the Asad regime (consummated by the bloodshed of Hama), come back to haunt them. A comprehensive Middle East peace could unshackle the Syrian majority who would demand a return of their political and civil rights, unleash a wave of Sunni revanchisme, and possibly lead to retribution for the events of Hama and over four decades of repressive 'Alawite

[266] *New York Times*, September 12, 1984.

[267] Goodarzi, 2006, p. 75.

domination.' The best scenario for Alawite interests therefore was what Abd al-Halim Khaddam called preserving the status quo in "a situation of no peace no war."[268]

Strategic rents notwithstanding, the policy of continual confrontation with Israel has brought significant economic costs for Syria. Other 'frontline' Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan alleviated economic pressures, considered dangerous to the existing regimes, by undertaking peace negotiations with Israel.[269] Egypt completed a treaty with Israel in 1979 and Jordan did the same in 1994. The ensuing economic concessions from western donors served to strengthen the economies and living standards of both countries.[270] In Syria's case, because of the reasons outlined above of maintaining the emergency laws and preventing Alawite association with an Israeli peace deal, the Asad regime, (even if it wanted to) could not follow this course. The country therefore experienced consistent economic challenges, especially after the collapse of its Soviet ally in 1991.

Serious economic deterioration could have strained Alawite 'asabiyya, and bred discontent among the wider Syrian population if it came in the context of enrichment of the regime elite. On the whole, Hafiz al-Asad was careful to avoid this scenario. His main asset in this regard was a firm hold over Lebanon and its superior economy, which helped alleviate Syria's economic problems. Moreover, Asad was careful to restrict overt displays of wealth by the regime elite.

Enlisting External Support

According to Ibn Khaldun, when a "ruler seeks the help of clients and followers" outside of his group, it can be seen as a symptom of the dynasty's decline.[271] In

[268] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, Paris, September, 2009.

[269] Winckler, 1999, p. 157.

[270] Eliyahu Kanovsky, 'Will Arab-Israel Peace Bring Prosperity?' *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 1994).

[271] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, p. 146.

this sense the Islamic Republic of Iran became the most significant external influence on the Asad dynasty. Iran came to represent a renewal of Shi'ite political and religious support to the Alawites. After the 1979 Iranian revolution the Asad regime immediately reversed its previous hostile foreign policy towards Iran and sought close relations with the revolutionary Islamist regime in Tehran.[272] This seemed an unusual step for an avowedly secular Ba'athist regime engaged in a bitter struggle against Islamists at home. Also, as already discussed, many Syrian Muslims took inspiration from the Iranian people's overthrow of the corrupt and repressive rule of the Shah. It was ironic then that the Syrian-Iranian alliance, which quickly developed in the early 1980s, helped consolidate the 'corrupt and repressive' Asad regime.

Hafiz al-Asad quickly looked to bolster Alawite religious legitimacy through the new relations. The Grand Mufti of Syria, the regime appointed Sunni Kurd, Ahmed Kuftaro (d.2004), "praised the Iranian revolution" and declared that "there was no difference between Sunnis and Shi'ites."[273] The policy of equating Alawism with orthodox Shi'ism, begun in the early 1970s, now paid political dividends. Iranians are predominantly Shi'a and in Alawite history, Shi'ite political powers had been, with the exception of the Mirdasids (1024-1080), favourable to Alawite interests. Shi'ite clerics had already come to the aid of the Asad regime in the 1970s by endorsing Alawite religious credentials, but now the Alawites had, for the first time since the Hamdanids, a major Shi'ite state as a political ally.

Recalling Ottoman concerns about Alawites serving as a bridgehead for Persian designs in the Levant, it is interesting that it was through precisely this channel that the Iranians began to assert influence in the region in the early 1980s. The Asad regime became a vital conduit for the Iranians to the major Shi'ite community of the Levant based in southern Lebanon. For its part the Syrian

[272] Goodarzi, 2006, p. 16.

[273] Ibid. p. 25.

regime gained another valuable political ally in Lebanon to add to the Shi'ite *'Amal* movement, begun by Musa al-Sadr, and the Alawite ADP in Tripoli. This was the Iranian backed militant Islamist Shi'ite movement *Hizballah* (Party of God).

Hizballah's political influence among Lebanese Shi'ites grew as a result of Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982. Their militia's active hostilities against the Israeli forces provided substance to the Khaldunian 'external threat,' without Syria having to engage directly in the confrontation. Hizballah therefore provided benefit to the Asad regime in maintaining its domestic situation. Moreover, the Lebanese Shi'ites provided strategic depth in the Asad-Alawite struggle against Sunni Islamists now operating out of Tripoli.

Hafiz al-Asad was cautious in his dealings with Iran and Hizballah, always looking to maintain a firm control over what he viewed as his Lebanese sphere of influence. Religious extremism was a threat to Alawite interests and was not tolerated from either Sunnis or Shi'ites. For example, when fighting broke out again in June 1985 between Sunni Islamists, (now under the name *Tawheed*) and Alawites of the ADP,[274] Asad pounded Tripoli with artillery in similar fashion to Hama three years prior.[275] In 1987 Alawite colonels, Hisham al-Mouallaq, Ali Deeb and Abd al-Halim Sultan, all veterans of the 1982 Hama campaign, were dispatched with their units to curb Hizballah overzealousness. This included the summary execution of twenty three Hizballah militiamen in Beirut.[276] This sent a strong message to Iran that Syrian supremacy in Lebanon was not to be challenged.[277]

---

[274] Goodarzi, 2006, pp. 149-150.

[275] Ibid. pp. 155-156.

[276] Ibid. pp.201-202; This was possibly done in retaliation for their kidnapping of a pro-Syrian Christian politician, Michel Samaha, by Hizballah.

[277] Ibid. p. 203.

Nonetheless, by 1988 the Syria-Iran partnership had "evolved into a durable regional alliance."[278] Successive international actors have misinterpreted this relationship. Outwardly it seems that 'secular Arab' Syria should be amenable to positive inducements to leave the alliance with Islamist Persian Iran and radical Hizballah, yet successive attempts to do so have failed. Former Syrian foreign minister, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, was emphatic when he told this author in 2009 that "[Bashar] is not dividing himself from Iran."[279]

The longstanding durability of the Syria-Iran alliance is understandable in the context of Alawite 'asabiyya. First, while the original secular ideals of Hafiz al-Asad were genuine, they also cloaked the religious particularism of his Alawite power base. Secondly, Alawites have only ever benefited from political relations with Shi'ite powers, and indeed consider themselves closely associated to the Shi'a creed. It is understandable, therefore, that they would trust this alliance over Sunni Arab or Western states. Shaykh 'Ali Yeral demonstrated the Alawite perspective of the Syrian-Iranian alliance:

> [The relationship] is important in religion or in politics. This creates a common sentiment [...] the Alawites and the Shi'a are one community, which unites them to the *ahl al-bayt* (family of the Prophet Muhammad). During the Iran-Iraq war, Syria was on the side of Iran. Why? Because Iran was the one that was oppressed. So Iran will be on the side of [Alawites in] Syria if there is a political, economic and religious problem.[280]

Another aspect to the Syrian-Iranian alliance came to prominence after the end of the Cold War. The demise of the Soviet Union meant that the Asad dynasty needed allies that would not pressure it to reform in a way that would risk

[278] Goodarzi, 2006, p. 271.

[279] Interview with the author, September 16, 2009, Paris.

[280] Shaykh 'Ali Yeral, interview with this author, Antakya, March 28, 2011.

weakening Alawite ‘asabiyya. Structural economic reforms, like those pressed on Jordan by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for example, would most negatively affect those employed in the public sector, which of course meant Alawites. Iran therefore provided an ideal economic, political and religious ally, in terms of maintaining Syria's domestic political equation. It is important to note however, that Hafiz al-Asad never allowed any of his external allies, including the Soviet Union, Hizballah or Iran, to surpass his Alawite power base in terms of strategic importance in the maintenance of his rule. This was a vital element in maintaining his domestic and regional autonomy and influence.

Overall, Hafiz al-Asad was able to manipulate regional circumstances, emphasizing external threats, to help uphold the ‘asabiyya of Syrian Alawites. The Israeli conflict provided the Asad dynasty with the quintessential Khaldunian external threat. The constant presence of a menacing threat over the horizon distracted Syrians from their country's poor economic performance and lack of freedoms. For Alawites, this served as a second layer of anxiety to add to their apprehension about Sunni Arab desires for revenge after the violence of Hama in 1982.

According to Ibn Khaldun, the cultivation of external allies outside of the ruler's group is symptomatic of a dynasty's decline.[281] However, the Iranian and Hizballah alliances amplified the strategic clout of the Asad dynasty, enabling it to manipulate regional events to its domestic advantage. Moreover, the Shi'a identity of both these regional actors was attractive to Alawites whose history and religion has significant connection with the Shi'a tradition. Hafiz al-Asad was also mindful to keep these allies at arm's length to maintain the autonomy of his regime, while keeping his primary powerbase in the Alawite community.

Preparing for Succession

---

[281] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 146.

In the 1990s a major preoccupation of Hafiz al-Asad was ensuring the continuance of the Asad family dynasty. Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who was a close observer of the lead up to the hereditary succession, told this writer how Rifa'at al-Asad's 1984 coup attempt did not lessen Hafiz al-Asad's determination to keep Syrian political power within the Asad family:

> Even though this [coup attempt] happened with his own brother he still wanted the succession to be from one of his own family members if not his brother. He concentrated on his sons. He started building the security and military forces around that idea that he wanted his son to take over. So in the 1990s he started reforming [the] security and military in order to make it easier for his son to succeed.[282]

Initially Hafiz al-Asad's eldest son, Basil was groomed to succeed. With Basil's death in a car accident in 1994, the second son, Bashar, was taken out of his medical training as an ophthalmologist to assume the role of successor. It was questionable however, whether the young, inexperienced and 'weak looking' Bashar had the ability to manage the political balancing act of preserving the status quo in Syria and providing for Alawite security.[283] Some doubted that the "secondary regime strongmen" - which essentially meant top Alawite generals in the military and intelligence services - would be willing to transfer their loyalties to the unqualified and inexperienced Bashar al-Asad.[284]

To be sure, the prospect of a post-Asad Syria would have been contemplated by many Alawites in the latter part of the 1990s as the health of the President declined. The spectre of Sunni revenge for the Hama massacre hung

---

[282] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author.

[283] Risa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes*, Adelphi Paper No. 324 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 57. For some commentary on the personal characteristics of Bashar al-Asad and the circumstances of his becoming heir to the Asad dynasty, see also Don Belt, "Shadowland," *National Geographic*, November, 2009

[284] Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1995), p. 269.

over the Alawite population as they waited to see who could assume responsibility for the security of the community. After all, a successful transition of Alawite political power would be a novelty. For example, the demise of Ismail Khayr Bey ended that family's political fortunes and brought a thorough repression of the whole Alawite community, and Suleiman Murshid's son met a similar fate to his father when he attempted to resume the former's autonomist aspirations.

If there had existed a genuine and widely held belief among Alawites that Bashar could not fulfil the position established by his father, it is possible that Alawite 'asabiyya for the Asad dynasty would have declined. In Bashar's favour was the fact that a considerable amount of political capital had been invested in legitimising the Asad name as synonymous with Syrian and Arab national aspirations. Moreover, to transfer political power to another Alawite clan or family would have been highly inflammatory to the Sunni majority as a flagrant demonstration of Alawite dominance in Syrian politics.

Most importantly however, was the fact that over the previous three decades, Hafiz al-Asad had made certain that no alternative power bases existed among the Alawite community. One notable example was former Alawite strongman, Salah Jadid, who remained 'safely' incarcerated for twenty-three years until his death in 1993.[285] To be doubly certain, in 1998-99 Hafiz al-Asad conducted a ruthless purge of any potential rivals for power, including many of his closest friends, in order to ensure his family's retention of power through his son, Bashar. In addition, several influential Sunnis were removed from their positions in the lead up to the succession. Long time prime minister, Mahmoud al-Zouabi, ostensibly, committed suicide and in 1998 the Army Chief of Staff, Hikmat Shihabi, fled to the United States.[286] Both had been key figures of Hafiz al-Asad's

---

[285] 'Salah Jadid, 63, Leader of Syria Deposed and Imprisoned by Asad,' *New York Times*, August 24, 1993.

[286] Paul Kingston, O. Haklai & N. Hasemi, 'Entering the 21st century - The Middle East,' *International Journal*, Vol.55, 1999-2000, p. 652.

regime, but seemingly they could not be trusted to remain on the sidelines during a dynastic transfer of power. Hafiz al-Asad's diligence in eliminating potential rivals to Bashar was shown in the common refrain around Damascus after his death in June 2000, "*ma fi gheiru*" (there is no one else)[287]

Apprehension about their continued security in the event of Hafiz al-Asad's death led to renewed efforts to promote the Islamic credentials of the Alawite sect. Hence, in the 1990s numerous 'scholarly' publications appeared arguing the close linkage of the Alawite religion to the Ja'afari school of Shi'a Islam.[288] It is possible that Hafiz al-Asad, recognising his deteriorating health and his failure to integrate Alawites in Syrian society through Arab nationalism and a broadened Islamic identity, sought to renew Alawite claims to Islamic credentials via the Shi'a channel. This policy was made easier by the willingness of Shi'a scholars, with close links to Syria's Iranian allies, to provide documentary evidence of Alawite-Shi'a unity. The readiness of Alawites to present themselves as orthodox Shi'ites was evident in an interview by this author with the Alawite shaykh, Muhammad Boz in 2011. He portrayed Alawites origins in terms of the original split between the Sunni and Shi'a communities: Following the burial of the Prophet Muhammad and the designation of Abu Bakr as the successor, Boz said, "the ones who accepted the will of the Prophet were called Alawites and the ones who followed the choice of Abu Bakr became the Sunni."[289]

By 1999 the necessary preconditions were established for Bashar al-Asad's accession.[290] Bashar was promoted as the only viable option to protect Alawite interests. Simultaneously the Muslim identity of the sect was buttressed in

---

[287] Shmuel Bar, 'Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview,' *Comparative Strategy*, Vol.25, 2006, Taylor & Francis, p. 369.

[288] For example see, Shaykh 'Ali 'Aziz al-Ibrahim, *The Alawites and the Shi'a*, (Beirut: 1992); Also three books were published by the son of Alawite Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Khayr, see: Ulrike Freitag, 'In search of 'Historical Correctness': The Ba'th Party in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Jan., 1999), Frank Cass, London, pp. 12-13.

[289] Shaykh Muhammad Boz, interview with this author, Antakya, March 28, 2011.

[290] Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), p. 39.

preparation for a potentially turbulent power transfer. The most significant legacy that would be passed on to the second generation of the Asad dynasty was however, an acutely dilapidated economy, which had deteriorated steadily since 1996.[291] In 1999 Hafiz al-Asad deflected the blame for the state of the economy to the long serving Prime Minister, Mahmoud al-Zouabi, and his government. Ironically, in light of events in 2011, Hafiz al-Asad stated his readiness to "step into the street to demonstrate" against the corruption and incompetence of the government which he described as the "worst ever witnessed by the country."[292] This was a hallmark of Hafiz al-Asad's special talent for manipulating propaganda to buttress the stability of Asad rule against all odds.

Overview

Overall, under Hafiz al-Asad, Alawite 'asabiyya was maintained at a high level and the regime, after some initial crises, consolidated its power. Hafiz al-Asad's careful pragmatism and shrewd manoeuvring on the regional and domestic fronts played a major part in preserving strong Alawite support for his rule. Alawite loyalty was clearly demonstrated during the struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood culminating in the brutal destruction of the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama in 1982. The possibility of repercussions from this 'Faustian bargain' hung over the Alawite community as the next generation of Asad rule in Syria approached.

Ibn Khaldun wrote that famine, overpopulation and pestilence occur at the end of dynasties, and moreover, he said rulers born to power often do not possess the necessary qualities to rule.[293] At the dawn of the second generation of the Asad dynasty, economic stagnation and population growth were already threatening to bring two of these outcomes: overpopulation and famine (or at least extreme poverty). Whether or not Bashar al-Asad would possess the qualities of a strong

---

[291] Ibid. p. 37.

[292] Ibid. p. 43.

[293] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 149.

ruler, able to manage the political complexities of modern Syria, remained to be seen. According to Ibn Khaldun it is in "the second stage the ruler gains complete control over his people, claims royal authority all for himself [...] and prevents them from trying to share in it."[294] The resulting decline in 'asabiyya exposes the dynasty to rivals for power. Chapter six explores whether or not this occurred in Syria

[294] Ibid. p. 141.

Chapter Six

Alawite 'Asabiyya for Bashar al-Asad: Change or Continuity?

On Saturday June 10, 2000, Hafiz al-Asad died of a heart attack aged sixty-nine.[1] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who was scheduled to have a meeting with Asad that day, was returning to Damascus. When he arrived at the Presidents house he found the inner core of the Syrian regime gathered there. Khaddam was informed that the President was dead and they told him "since you were not in the house we have agreed to have Bashar as the successor."[2] Khaddam, one of two vice-presidents and the senior politician in the country, had grown up with aspirations for a democratic Syria and did not agree with the dynastic succession but he could not dispute the decision; as he later reflected:

> When they told me that, I couldn't really say no because, first, the president had just died, so it wasn't appropriate to actually discuss that at the time. Second, I saw that the assembly of the leaders of the party all said that they wanted Bashar to succeed, so by me saying no it would create a disturbance in the country.[3]

Despite his reservations, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who was nominally running the country, provided the official pronouncements for the rapid promotion of Hafiz al-Asad's thirty-four year old son, Bashar.[4] Bashar al-Asad had no genuine background in politics or the military. Being Hafiz al-Asad's eldest

---

[1] *New York Times*, June 12, 2000.

[2] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, Paris, September, 2009.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The day after his father's death, Bashar was named commander of Syria's Armed forces, he was promoted from Colonel to Lieutenant-general, and the Regional Command of the Ba'ath Party nominated him for the Syrian presidency, *New York Times*, June 12, 2000.

surviving son was his only qualification for the presidency. This underlined the lack of power among Sunni functionaries like Khaddam, who provided a façade for real political power in Syria. Bashar al-Asad's succession confirmed that Syria was ruled by a hereditary dynasty. Following the successful upholding of Alawite 'asabiyya during the previous thirty years, the Alawite community remained the mainstay of the Asad dynasty.

Alawite support was, understandably, strong among those closely connected to the Asad family. A forty-four year old Alawite woman from Qurdaha illustrated this with a comment shortly after the death of Hafiz al-Asad: "[...] for us the most important [thing] is that the president should come from the Asad family."[5] The strength of feeling among Alawites, further removed from the centre of power, for continued Asad rule in 2000 is more difficult to establish. Given however, the widespread Alawite approval of Hafiz al-Asad's leadership, it could be assumed that Bashar al-Asad, at least, began his rule with broad Alawite support. According to Ibn Khaldun the second stage of a dynasty brings an accelerated decline in 'asabiyya as the ruler separates himself from his group:

> […]with the approach of the second stage, the ruler shows himself independent of his people, claims all the glory for himself, and pushes his people away from [his power] with the palms of his hands. As a result, his own people become in fact, his enemies.[6]

This chapter examines whether Khaldun's idea corresponds with the case of the Alawites. In short, did Alawite 'asabiyya for the Asad dynasty begin to decline in the first decade of Bashar al-Asad's rule? If so, what factors contributed to the diminution of Alawite support? And what factor[s] could act to prevent Alawite abandonment of the Asad dynasty?

---

[5] Susan Sachs, 'Assad Patronage Puts a Small Sect on Top In Syria,' *New York Times*, June 22, 2000.

[6] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 146.

Early Directions of Bashar al-Asad

The transfer of Syrian political power to the next generation of the Asad family was outwardly greeted with singular enthusiasm in Syria. On the streets of Damascus crowds chanted "God, Syria and Bashar only." Noteworthy however, was the heavy presence of uniformed security officers monitoring proceedings,[7] which suggested the controlled nature of these 'spontaneous' demonstrations. The excitement of many Syrians was however, quite possibly genuine. After three decades of iron-fisted rule, the death of Hafiz al-Asad portended a change from the status quo – any change was welcome. A real indication of Sunni feelings for the Asad dynasty was, however, shown by attendance of funeral tents erected around the country. In the Alawite mountain villages these tents were full, but in Sunni areas they were "nearly deserted."[8]

In the Asad hometown, Qurdaha, a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent perceived an atmosphere of anxiety.[9] With the departure of their chief benefactor and protector, Alawites were fearful about their future and the ability of Bashar al-Asad to protect their interests. While Sunnis welcomed any shift in the political status quo, many Alawites were deeply concerned about the consequences of change. Some Alawites sought comfort in the hope that the period of Asad rule had made a positive difference in reconciling sectarian differences in Syria.

At the funeral of Hafiz al-Asad an Alawite civil engineer said, "We and the Sunnis are closer than in the past, because of civilization, [and] the media [...]."[10] In other words, some Alawites hoped that modernization and the state run media had succeeded in shaping peoples perspectives away from sectarianism. Another comment by a female Alawite respondent showed clear sectarian prejudice and an elitist attitude that seems remarkable in view of Alawite social history: "[...] it's

---

[7] 'Leaders of Syria building support for son of Assad,' *New York Times*, June 12, 2000; *The Economist*, June 15, 2000.

[8] Hugh Pope, 'Assad's Death Worries Most-Favoured Sect, '*Wall Street Journal*, New York, June 14, 2000.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

not special treatment that helps us get good jobs. We are more educated, more intelligent, [and] more open."[11] Thirty years of Asad rule had produced a mindset among younger bourgeois Alawites in which the humble origins of the community ceased to exist and Alawites were inherently superior to Sunnis. It should be noted however, that these comments come from Qurdaha residents, the Alawites closest to the centre of Asad dynasty patronage and privilege and are not representative of the Alawite community as a whole.

International observers waited to see if the Syrian power structure would remain intact; a diplomat in Washington implicitly questioned continued Alawite support for the Asad dynasty: "[…] will all the forces who supported the father, support the son?"[12] Over ninety percent of generals in the Syrian military were Alawites at the outset of Bashar al-Asad's rule.[13] Many of these generals were however subjected to an 'anti-corruption' purge which removed potential rivals to Bashar's succession.[14] For example, in February 2000 Hasan Khalil replaced 'Ali Duba, head of military security since 1974, and Adnan Makhlouf was dismissed as head of the Republican Guard and replaced with Bashar's close associate 'Ali Hasan.[15] This process remained incomplete in June 2000, perhaps leaving potential for cracks in Alawite solidarity to emerge. Israeli military advisor Uri Lubrani said at the time: "They [the Syrians] have crowned a 34 year-old fellow. They made him the military commander over night. [It is not hard to guess] what the generals in the Syrian Army are thinking. I would say that he has barely a fifty percent

[11] Hugh Pope, June 14, 2000.

[12] 'A New Hurdle to Peace,' *New York Times*, June 11, 2000.

[13] Eyal Zisser, 'The Syrian Army on the Domestic and External Fronts,' in *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy*, eds. B. Rubin and T. Keaney, (Oxon: Frank Cass, 2002); Former Syrian vice-president Abd al-Halim Khaddam suggested a figure of ninety five percent, interview with the author.

[14] Paul Kingston, O. Haklai & N. Hasemi, 'Entering the 21st century - The Middle East,' *International Journal*, Vol.55, 1999-2000, p.652; Ziadeh, 2011, p. 41.

[15] Zisser, 2002, p. 120.

chance of survival."[16] The remaining Alawite generals, however, all pledged their allegiance to the new President.[17]

A coalition of Alawite tribal elders and key army officers along with Bashar al-Asad's sister, Bushra, and her husband, Asef Shawkat (b.1951/2), came together to back Bashar.[18] Shawkat, while not officially in charge, held the most influential role in Military Intelligence, and was instrumental in Bashar shoring up his position among the Alawite dominated military-security establishment.[19] The only clear indication of Alawite opposition came from the exiled Rifa'at al-Asad, who threatened from his villa in Spain, to return to Syria and take his 'rightful place' as president.[20] This created momentary doubt about Alawite solidarity, as some diplomats claimed that Rifa'at al-Asad still commanded loyalty in some Syrian Army units.[21] Rifa'at's challenge never materialized, however, and there was no evidence of Alawite disunity within the military.[22]

On July 10, 2000, Bashar al-Asad was officially elected to the presidency in a carefully controlled national referendum with 97.3 percent of ballots in his favour, the transfer of power was complete.[23] On both sides of Syria's main sectarian divide the question was what direction would the new generation of the Asad dynasty take? Many Alawites hoped for continuance of the status quo that had, thus far, provided some material benefits and security against the Sunni majority. Sunnis hoped for a political opening from the young and seemingly

---

[16] Zisser, 2002, p. 115.

[17] 'Bashar's World,' *The Economist*, June 15, 2000.

[18] Cited in Thomas Friedman, 'Three Movies and a Funeral,' *New York Times*, June 16, 2000; On Bushra al-Asad's important role in the Asad family see, Mohamad Daoud, 'Dossier: Bushra Assad,' *Mid-East Monitor*, Vol.1, No.3, September-October, 2006.

[19] Jane Perlez, 'Allbright Finds Syria's new Leader Willing to Pursue Talks,' *New York Times*, June 14, 2000.

[20] *The Economist*, June 15th, 2000; *New York Times*, June 22, 2000; Paul Kingston, O. Haklai & N. Hasemi, 'Entering the 21st century - The Middle East,' *International Journal*, Vol.55, 1999-2000, p.652.

[21] Susan Sachs, 'Exiled Relative issues Challenge to Syria's Heir to Power,' *New York Times*, June 13, 2000.

[22] Eyal Zisser, 2001, p.2.

[23] Ariel I. Ahram, 'Iraq and Syria: The Dilemma of Dynasty,' *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.9, No.2, 2002, p. 42.

progressive minded new president.[24] Bashar al-Asad's common slogan during his early presidency: "change through continuity," while seemingly contradictory, appealed to both communities' political hopes.[25]

Initially Bashar al-Asad appeared to go against Alawite interests by presenting a reformist approach. Portraits of Bashar around Damascus bore the slogan "The leader to unveil a new era."[26] By late 2000 the climate of political change extended beyond slogans as politicians, intellectuals and civil society activists met freely to lobby the government on issues of political and economic reform and to demand the removal of the emergency laws, in place since 1963. This relaxation of the Syrian political arena in late 2000, early 2001, came to be known as the 'Damascus Spring.'[27] Key figures who took advantage of this opening included independent Sunni parliamentarian and businessman, Riad Seif, and the Christian dissident writer, Michel Kilo.

An interesting component of renewed political activity in Syria was the resurfacing of liberal Alawite voices, mostly silent since the early 1980s. An Alawite economist named Aref Dalila, for example, called on people to take to the streets to demand political and economic reform. Astonishingly, rather than being firmly repressed, the state controlled newspaper, *Al-Thawra*, responded by publishing details of Dalila's critique of economic policy under Hafiz al-Asad.[28] This perhaps reflected Bashar's desire to adjust the economic policies of his father.

There are several ways the 'Damascus Spring' could be interpreted. Some claim it indicated the genuine desire of Bashar al-Asad to open up the country politically, but the 'old guard' obstructed this attempt.[29] It was possibly a way of

---

[24] Susan Sachs, 'Syrians See In the Heir Possibility Of Progress,' *New York Times*, June 11, 2000.

[25] Gary Gambill, 'The Lion in Winter: Bashar Assad's Self-Destruction,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.1, No.1, February 2006.

[26] 'Is Syria really changing?' *The Economist*, November 16, 2000.

[27] On the Damascus Spring see: Radwan Ziadeh, 2011, pp.61-75.

[28] *The Economist*, November 16, 2000.

[29] See for example, Carsten Wieland, *Syria at Bay, Secularism, Islamism, and Pax Americana*, (London: Hurst, 2006).

rooting out dissenting elements in the country to help Bashar al-Asad consolidate his rule. It may have been designed to prevent an 'explosion' of pent up resentment and anger among the Sunni community if their expectations for change in Syria resulted in complete disappointment. Another interpretation could be that Bashar al-Asad and the new generation of the Asad dynasty inner core sought to lessen the importance of the Alawite community as the 'keystone' in the Syrian power structure. According to one contemporary assessment, "Alawites began to worry that [the regime] might sink them,"[30] or in other words, Alawites felt the Asad dynasty sought to push them away from its political power in Syria. It is possible that the sons (and daughters) of the elite, who now found themselves in positions of power, had less recollection of the sectarian struggles of the 1970s and early 1980s, and in their privileged upbringings had lost appreciation for sectarian undercurrents in the country. The long ban on discussion of sectarian divisions may have begun to give an illusion of harmony to elite Alawites, perhaps evident in the civil engineer's comments (quoted above) about the improved relations of Sunnis and Alawites.

Bashar al-Asad epitomised this new generation of well educated and privileged Alawites and seemed remarkably unapologetic about the circumstances of his rise to power, as if it was quite natural that he would lead the country at the age of thirty four. He had little personal recollection of the long struggles of the Alawite community against poverty and religious discrimination and was only sixteen when the Muslim Brotherhood rebels were annihilated at Hama. He was kept far from harm's way with little understanding of events. With this in mind, it is possible that Bashar did not appreciate, with the same clarity as his father, the importance of Alawite support to the stability of his regime and consequently dared to set forth in directions that could prove unpopular with

[30] Neil Farquhar, 'Syria Is Forced to Adapt To a New Power Next Door,' *New York Times*, April 22, 2003.

many Alawites.[31] A parallel can be drawn between the mind-set of Bashar al-Asad and Ibn Khaldun's definition of a ruler born into power and privilege. The new ruler is unsure why he is obliged to share power with his group, as his predecessor had, and therefore proceeds to claim all the 'glory' as rightfully his and pushes his group away from his power. Riyad Ghassan Agha, head of the political bureau of the presidency, (unwittingly) illustrated this process in an interview with *Al-Jazeera* in June 2000:

> There is no such thing as the Alawite sect in Syria [...] If Dr Asad surrounds himself with cousins, uncles and other members of the extended [...] family, that is perfectly natural, do you think he would have his enemies as his assistants?[32]

Denial of Alawite particularism was of course standard procedure for regime officials during the time of Hafiz al-Asad, but denying the existence of the Alawite community while emphasising the importance of Bashar's close family and friends, echoes Ibn Khaldun's predictions about the distancing of a dynasty from its group in the second stage.

To some Alawites it appeared as if Bashar al-Asad was closer to the Sunni community than his father.[33] His marriage in 2001 to Asma Akhraz (b.1975), a well educated, London born Sunni from a wealthy Homs family,[34] was taken by some Alawites as a sign that Bashar had abandoned his roots; the union was reportedly opposed by Bashar's mother, Anisa Makhlouf, on this basis.[35] It was perhaps seen by Alawite elites as a sign that Bashar was going to abandon them as his primary

---

[31] This impression is gained from the transcript of an interview with Bashar al-Asad by Don Belt, see, 'Shadowland,' *National Geographic*, November, 2009.

[32] *New York Times*, June 22, 2000, cites *Al-Jazeera*.

[33] Shaykh 'Ali Yeral, interview with the author, Antakya, March 28, 2011.

[34] Shmuel Bar, 'Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview,' *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 25, pp. 353-445, 2006, p. 380.

[35] Shmuel Bar, 2006, p. 380.

power base, which could threaten their privileged positions." [36] Another perspective of ordinary Alawites, however, was that Bashar's marriage to a Sunni was a positive development for Alawite social integration in Syria. For instance, the Alawite shaykh 'Ali Yeral suggested that the marriage was "considered a strong rapprochement between the Alawites and Sunnis." [37] Sunni-Alawite rapprochement could of course alleviate Alawite sectarian insecurity, which could unlock a main factor preserving Alawite 'asabiyya for the Asad dynasty.

A key divergence between the interests of ordinary Alawites and the new president came in the area of economic policy. An indication of the economic direction that the new president wanted to take was shown in the makeup of a new cabinet in March 2000. Reportedly hand selected by Bashar, it included "a number of men considered open to the idea of a free market economy." These key advisors included young well educated sons of the Alawite elite along with some young entrepreneurs from prominent Sunni Damascus families.[38] Thus the initial economic approach of Bashar actually more closely resembled that of his Uncle Rifa'at al-Asad than his father. For Alawites who had rejected Rifa'at's approach in 1984, Bashar's course must have been disconcerting as it seemed that the Asad dynasty was moving away from Alawite core interests of bureaucratic socialism, which provided employment for Alawites, and tight control over the majority Sunni population.

There was some expectation among international actors that the new Syrian leader would in fact turn out to be a 'modernizing reformer,' inclined towards the West.[39] The United States hoped for this outcome and took encouragement from Bashar's statement, in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict, "I will carry on peace

---

[36] Neil Farquhar, 'Syria Is Forced to Adapt To a New Power Next Door,' *New York Times*, April 22, 2003.

[37] Shaykh 'Ali Yeral, interview with the author, Antakya, March 28, 2011.

[38] Susan Sachs, 'Syrians See In the Heir Possibility Of Progress,' *New York Times*, June 11, 2000.

[39] Jane Perlez, 'Allbright Finds Syria's new Leader Willing to Pursue Talks,' *New York Times*, June 14, 2000.

just like my father did."[40] Recalling Hafiz al-Asad's problems with completing a peace deal with Israel, the United States should actually have read this as a negative sign for the peace process.

By late 2001 the political opening in the country known as the 'Damascus Spring' was firmly closed. Ten of the most vocal government critics were arrested, including Riad Seif and Aref Dalila in September 2001.[41] Dalila received a seven year sentence, while his Sunni colleagues were given five year prison terms.[42] The harsher punishment of Dalila matches the seven year sentence passed down in 1984 to Alawite activist, Louay Hussein, and indicates a long standing deterrence policy against Alawite dissent. The circumstances of Riad Seif's arrest provided an insight into the new characteristics of the Asad dynasty. The official reason for his arrest was that he reopened his political forum without permission, but associates of Seif suggested the real cause for his arrest was his criticism of a mobile phone contract, awarded to Bashar al-Asad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf.[43] This was an early sign of how economic reforms would disproportionately benefit those with close connections to the Asad dynasty in a process that Abd al-Halim Khaddam described to this writer as "the corporatization of corruption."[44]

The implications for Alawite 'asabiyya into the second year of Bashar al-Asad's rule were twofold. On one hand the clamp down on political reform may have reassured some Alawites that the regime was not going to allow a potentially dangerous Sunni resurgence in political affairs. On the other hand, changes to the socialist, centrally planned economy threatened the financial security of many Alawites. Moreover, the burgeoning extreme wealth of those close to the regime,

---

[40] Ibid.

[41] Jane Perlez, 'Syria's New Cabinet Is Overshadowed by Old Realities,' *New York Times*, January 21, 2002.

[42] Andrew England, "Damascus spring' fades from memory," *Financial Times*, September 13, 2008.

[43] Riad Seif publically stated that the contract "would cost the Syrian public billions of dollars in lost revenue," Jane Perlez, 'Syria's New Cabinet Is Overshadowed by Old Realities,' *New York Times*, January 21, 2002.

[44] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author.

such as Rami Makhlouf, was a source of resentment by the wider Alawite community. Hafiz al-Asad had always 'taken care' of the whole Alawite community whereas Bashar seemed to be abandoning all but his inner circle.

In sum, the new generation of the Asad dynasty brought both change and continuity, but not in the way Alawites, or Sunnis, hoped for. Political change briefly emerged as a possibility, but was quickly withdrawn. Economic change emerged, but in a way that 'corporatized corruption' and allowed the dynasty's inner circle to reap the benefits of reforms. Continuity of Asad rule did not equate to continuity of the main policies and style of rule of Hafiz al-Asad, which on the whole had been beneficial to Alawites. As predicted by Ibn Khaldun, Bashar al-Asad appeared to be "pushing his group away,"[45]

A Changed World: Challenges for the Asad Dynasty

The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 were a major juncture in world history. In terms of Alawite politics, it brought a difficult period. The international environment in the wake of the September 11 attacks contained two parallel developments potentially dangerous to Alawite interests. On one side the United States looked to militarily and politically impose itself in the Middle East with the objective of adjusting the region's political status quo. Opposite this was increasing Islamic fundamentalism. Political Islam made a gradual advance in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century, propelled by factors like Western colonialism, the creation of Israel and repressive authoritarianism. The forceful intervention of the United States in the Middle East in 2003, however, gave it new impetus. Both these factors would bring challenges to the stability of the Asad dynasty and the security of Alawites.

Meanwhile the Asad dynasty tried to preserve its economic and strategic regional interests. Syrian control in Lebanon, painstakingly achieved by Hafiz al-Asad, remained a key factor in preserving Asad rule. The departure of Israeli

---

[45] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 146.

forces from southern Lebanon in 2000, however, diminished Syria's justification for maintaining an armed presence in Lebanon.[46] This emboldened some Lebanese politicians to question the benefit of Syrian hegemony over their country. The most prominent of these politicians was a Sunni named Rafiq al-Hariri who was Lebanese Prime Minister twice in 1992-1998 and 2000-2004. Hariri enjoyed widespread popularity in Lebanon, powerful international alliances, and economic clout as a multi-billionaire with major regional business interests.[47] Although Hariri was secular in his approach to politics, he represented a focal point for Sunni political resurgence in the Levant, a dangerous development considering the Alawite situation in Syria. In short, Hariri posed a potential threat to Alawite security and Asad primacy in the Syria/Lebanon political arena.

By early 2003, challenges to the situation of the Asad dynasty and the Alawites loomed from the east also. The rapid removal of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime in Baghdad by the United States military sent shockwaves through the Syrian regime as the precariousness of their position became obvious.[48] Retired Syrian general and diplomat, Haitham Kilani voiced this anxiety: "We do not know what will happen to us after the Iraq war but it is certain there will be change."[49] Among the Syrian majority political change, once again, seemed about to become a reality. Symbolically, after the widely televised toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue on April 9, 2003,[50] a *New York Times* reporter observed a group of young Syrian men in Damascus, discussing whether a statue of Hafiz al-Asad would tip if given a push.[51] The sense of danger to the Syrian regime from external

---

[46] UN Security Council, UNSC/6878 Press Release, 'Security Council Endorses Secretary General's Conclusion on Israeli Withdrawal From Lebanon as of 16 June,' June 18, 2000.

[47] See, Marwan Iskander, *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon* (London: Saqi, 2006).

[48] Neil Farquhar, 'Syria, Long Ruthlessly Secular Sees Fervent Islamic Resurgence,' *New York Times*, October 24, 2003.

[49] Neil Farquhar, 'Syria Is Forced to Adapt To a New Power Next Door,' *New York Times*, April 22, 2003.

[50] Syrian State television aired a documentary about Islamic architecture during this event, however, satellite television, widely available in Syria by 2003, provided many Syrians with images of the dramatic events in Iraq in March/April 2003. See, Volker Perthes, 2004, p. 50.

[51] *New York Times*, April 22, 2003.

forces, and the possibility of a political upheaval in Syria, served to rally Alawites to the Asad dynasty.

Like the Crusader and Mongol invasions many centuries earlier, Western intervention in the modern Middle East acted as a catalyst for Sunni Islamic militancy, a development detrimental to Alawite interests. Ibn Taymiyya convinced the Mamluk authorities in the early fourteenth century, as part of confronting external challenges, to crack down on heterodox groups like the Alawites. The Asad dynasty, however, tried to control, and redirect, this latest surge of religious fervour to its own advantage but with little thought for long term implications for Alawites.

By late 2003 Islam appeared to be making a dramatic comeback in Syrian society after a long period of strictly enforced secularism. Islamic dress and customs became common place. A businessman from a well established Aleppan family commented, "Many of my liberal friends are suddenly turning to Islam."[52] According to Abd al-Razzak Eid, a Syrian political writer from Aleppo, this was an Asad regime "attempt at mobilization; they want to create an aggressive feeling against the Americans." Eid saw risks in the strategy of unleashing Islamist forces that could escalate out of control: "There is no overt political Islam [yet] but they are building a base, and the moment they have the chance, they will act to become fanatic, extremist movements."[53]

An example of this burgeoning extremism was the Aleppan Sheikh Mahmud al-Ghassi, also known as Abu al-Qa'qa', who delivered fiery sermons against the 'infidel' Americans. When asked however, whether he wanted an Islamic state in Syria he was hesitant, but said that "Islamic rule would be something organic once everyone realized that the faith can solve the country's problems." Al-Ghassi therefore flagged himself as a potential enemy to Alawite

---

[52] Lucy Ashton, 'Syria's retreat from Lebanon emboldens Islamist opposition,' *Financial Times*, May 6, 2005.

[53] *New York Times*, October 24, 2003.

interests, but in the short term, for the Asad dynasty, he was a useful instrument against the American threat.[54] How successful the regime was in linking its domestic legitimacy with rising Islamic sentiment could be seen at the close of one al-Ghassi's sermons: when he called for the freeing of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, he received a loud *Ya-Allah!* (Oh Lord), yet when he made an (obligatory) call for God to preserve Syria's rulers, the response was profoundly muted.[55]

Of all Syria's communities, a resurgence of militant Islamism carried the most risk for Alawites, bearing in mind the historic relations of the two communities and the still unpaid 'blood debt' of Hama 1982. Consequently, Asad regime policy likely affected Alawite 'asabiyya in a paradoxical way. The regime's apparent toleration of rising Islamist sentiment would have been regarded with disapproval by many Alawites. Conversely, heightened fears about rising Sunni fundamentalism would also push Alawites into greater reliance on the Asad dynasty for their security. As one Syrian intellectual described it, the Asad regime portrayed the choice as, "it's either us or a 'Taliban' government."[56]

The survival of the Asad dynasty became the top priority for Bashar al-Asad and his inner core; preserving long term Alawite security became secondary to addressing immediate threats. As part of responding to the American threat, the Syrian regime commenced a policy of funneling Sunni fighters through Syria into Iraq to confront the American forces.[57] This strategy served three purposes; firstly it was a convenient way of disposing of Islamic radicals, as they "impaled themselves" on the American forces in Iraq.[58] Secondly, it added to the Americans increasing difficulties as they became 'bogged down' in Iraq, which lessened

---

[54] Al-Ghassi's usefulness was both rhetorical and material, for example in 2003 he reportedly provided financial assistance to resistance forces in Iraq, see aired confession on Al-Fayhaa Televison, Iraq/UAE, January 14, 2005, translated by *Memri*, Special Dispatch No. 849.

[55] *New York Times*, October 24, 2003.

[56] Neil Farquhar, 'Syria, Long Ruthlessly Secular Sees Fervent Islamic Resurgence,' *New York Times*, October 24, 2003.

[57] 'Asharq Al-Awsat Talks to Paul Bremer (Part Two),' *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, London, May 15, 2009.

[58] Michael J. Totten, 'Killing a Crocodile,' *Commentary Magazine*, November 4, 2008.

American capability for further military operations in the wider region.[59] Lastly it sheltered the Asad dynasty's Alawite identity. To be seen to cooperate with the Americans would be highly inflammatory to Sunni Islamists who could revert to discourse similar to that used by Ibn Taymiyya, and declare the Asad regime as Alawite heretics, abettors of foreign aggressors and traitors to Islamic causes.

The threat that Alawites in the Syrian security establishment saw in the Iraq situation is shown by the brutal methods that they resorted to in order to infiltrate Iraq and gather information. One telling example involved an Alawite Mukhabarat officer, Brigadier General Al'a al-Saleh, who, according to a confession aired on *al-Iraqiya* television, kidnapped the daughter of a twenty eight year old Christian woman from Latakia. The daughter was held under threat of execution while the mother, who had been arrested on political charges, was trained in intelligence gathering and sent to Iraq to gather information.[60] The resort to these types of measures illustrates the anxiety of the Syrian regime and could reflect Ibn Khaldun's idea that increasing cruelty by a dynasty portends its decline.[61]

Despite the Asad dynasty's desperate efforts to stave off external and internal threats to its rule, by 2004 the danger had not dissipated. The demise of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Ba'athists gave renewed hope to secular opposition in Syria. For example, Syrian filmmaker and prominent civil society activist, Omar Amiralay (d.2011), made a film for European audiences entitled *A Flood in Ba'ath Country,* the theme of which was how the "myth of having to live under despots for eternity collapsed."[62] In an interview in Damascus with Neil Farquhar of the

---

[59] Although as Michael Young has argued, the US may never have really contemplated military intervention in Syria, Michael Young, 'The canard of regime change in Syria,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, December 16, 2010.

[60] 'Syrian Intelligence operative captured in Iraq,' *Al-Iraqiya Television*, Iraq, March 30, 2005, translated by Memri TV Project.

[61] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, pp. 152-154.

[62] Omar Amiralay was active during the 'Damascus Spring,' and a signatory to the Declaration of 99, demanding the lifting of Emergency laws, freeing of political prisoners, independent political parties and civil society in Syria, see: 'Statement by 99 Syrian Intellectuals,' *Al-Hayat*, London, September 27, 2000.

New York Times in March 2004, Amiralay openly made extraordinary anti-government remarks: "I think the image, the sense of terror has evaporated [...] when you see one of the two Ba'ath parties [...] collapsing, you can only hope that it will be the turn of the Syrian Ba'ath next."[63] Another remarkable example of increasing preparedness to show dissent occurred on March 8, 2004, when protesters demonstrated outside parliament buildings in Damascus demanding the end of the 1963 emergency laws.[64] Although security forces quickly broke up the demonstration, it showed that there was a genuine belief emerging that the regime could be challenged. This diminishment of fear among Syrians about showing dissent was a first crack in the edifice of Asad dynasty power. Opposition figures outside Syria were encouraged by the climate of dissent sweeping Syria. In Washington, Syrian exile and business man, Farid Ghadry, established the Reform Party of Syria. Ghadry held hopes for an internal upheaval in Syria based on what he claimed were "echoes of dissent" among the Syrian army and students.[65]

The emergence of other long suppressed centrifugal forces in Ba'athist Syria would, however, serve to quieten calls for reform from liberal dissidents. On March 12, 2004, fighting broke out between Kurds and Sunni Arabs during a football match at al-Qamishli and six Kurds were killed. Thirteen days of rioting followed, in the course of which, Kurdish rioters attacked Military Intelligence and State Security buildings in the town of Derik. The response of the security forces was brutal, forty three people were killed, hundreds were wounded and 2500 were arrested.[66] In Damascus, human rights lawyer, Anwar al-Bouni received

---

[63] Neil Farquhar, 'Hussein's Fall Leads Syrians to Test Government Limits,' *New York Times*, March 20, 2004; see 'Influential Syrian film-maker Amilray dies,' *Reuters*, Damascus, February 5, 2011.

[64] Ibid.

[65] 'Exile Seeks to Muster Opposition to Syrian Regime,' *Financial Times*, September 28, 2004.

[66] Tejel, 2009, pp. 115-116.

numerous calls from Kurds describing the ferocity of the security forces crackdown.[67]

In 2004 the Mukhabarat agencies remained mostly Alawite. It was common for people apprehended by intelligence officers to feign an Alawite accent in the hope of receiving leniency.[68] The violence in al-Qamishli and Derik, therefore, virtually amounted to a Kurdish-Alawite confrontation, representative of a serious deterioration in relations since Hafiz al-Asad's rule when Kurds had fought alongside Alawites at Hama. The Syrian regime, however, quickly seized on the ethno-religious violence and used it as a propaganda tool to bolster its shaky domestic position. Syrian state media established links between the sectarian violence in Iraq and the al-Qamishli riots as proof of the need to avoid any domestic, or externally imposed, political upheaval.[69] Hence, the Asad dynasty presented itself as the only safe option in a 'sea' of potential chaos. For Alawites, the community with the most to lose in an ethno-sectarian conflagration in Syria, this logic was readily absorbed.

In light of the bolstering effect for the Asad dynasty of the Kurdish riots of March 2004, another interpretation may be advanced. According to some Kurdish sources, the events of March 2004 were the result of a dispute between two competing intelligence agencies.[70] This explanation suggests that the riots were deliberately provoked by disgruntled elements in the security apparatus to show their "control over the country's stability."[71] Which intelligence branches were involved is not certain, however, scholar, Jordi Tejel, claims that it involved, on one side, "sectors of the intelligence services closely tied to Bashar al-Asad."[72] This

---

[67] *New York Times*, March 20, 2004.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Tejel, 2009, pp. 130-131.

[70] Ibid. p. 117; see also Julie Gauthier, 'The 2004 Events in al-Qamishli: Has the Kurdish question erupted in Syria,' in *Demystifying Syria*, ed. Fred Lawson, (London: Saqi, 2009), pp. 105-119.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Tejel, 2009, pp. 130-131..

suggests the involvement of Bashar's brother-in-law Asef Shawkat, head of Military Security, which was heavily involved in the fighting at al-Qamishli. The other Mukhabarat branch said to be involved involved was State Security, run by Shawkat's rival, the veteran Alawite general, Bahjat Sulieman (b.1945/46).[73]

Although it is difficult to determine the exact course of events in al-Qamishli the possibility of a rift in Alawite 'asabiyya near the top of the power structure cannot be discounted. The Syrian leadership was certainly under pressure in the period from 2003. It also raises the question whether Bashar al-Asad had full control over competing Alawite security elites. An illustration of different approaches between intelligence services is perceptible in the experiences of human rights lawyer, Anwar Bouni, who in 2004 was regularly summoned to Mukhabarat headquarters. Bouni described his visits to the State Security Branch as brief and surprisingly "friendly," but when summoned to Military Security buildings on one occasion, he spent two days in a waiting room with nothing to drink, and on the third day, a colonel threatened him with prison or "resort to other means" if he did not refrain from his civil activism.[74]

The conflicting approaches of different security branches in 2004 may illustrate the evolution of Alawite 'asabiyya in the second stage of the Asad dynasty. A departure is apparent between those close to the regime, and those Alawite elites, further from the inner core. In the former category were individuals like Asef Shawkat, whose primary objective was regime maintenance and the application of short term radical approaches to ensuring that goal. In the latter group could be individuals like Ghazi Kana'an and Bahjat Suleiman who supported more conservative approaches to policy formulation in view of long term implications for Alawite communal security in an increasingly volatile political environment. The nature of Syrian regime policy in the following period

[73] Shmuel Bar, 2006, p. 444.

[74] *New York Times*, March 20, 2004.

indicates the victory of the former approach and of Asef Shawkat, who appeared to retain the confidence of Bashar al-Asad.

The potential for widespread civil strife in Syria with deleterious consequences for Alawites was shown by the ferocity of the Kurdish riots. Even if the Kurdish riots were not entirely spontaneous, once provoked, the Kurds' pent up anger was certainly genuine. A thirty year-old Kurdish shop owner commented, "What happened did not come out of a void – the pressure has been building for nearly fifty years [...]."[75] The Kurds were of course the losers from the triumph of pan-Arab ideology in the 1960s, and by 2004 had experienced half a century of marginalisation. In 2004 most Syrian Sunni Arabs had experienced thirty four years of political marginalisation and possessed similar levels of pent up frustration, further honed by the destruction of Hama in 1982. It cannot be discounted that some senior Alawites sought alternatives to the Asad dynasty, which appeared to be leading their community towards catastrophe. Events in 2005 and 2006 presented such an opportunity.

Responses to External Threats: the Murder of Rafiq al-Hariri

Through 2004 two foreign policy factors contributed to bringing the Asad dynasty to a serious crisis and the verge of collapse. First, the Syrian regime's insistence on stirring chaos in Iraq greatly angered the United States administration, which sought concrete steps to unseat the regime in Damascus. Secondly, the thuggish behaviour and extortion of Lebanese financial institutions by the new generation of Syrian security 'overlords,' such as Brigadier Rustom Ghazali, rose to intolerable levels. This served to harden Lebanese resolve to rid their country of Syrian hegemony.[76]

---

[75] Neil Farquhar, 'Gains by Kin in Iraq Inflame Kurds' Anger at Syria,' *New York Times*, March 24, 2004.

[76] In 2004 Syria's new intelligence chief in Lebanon, Rustom Ghazali, allegedly made threats against Rafiq al-Hariri and his children, see Marwan Iskander, *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon* (London, Saqi, 2006), p. 56; on the growing resentment by Lebanese of Syrian economic extortion see pp. 89-90.

The critical act by the Asad dynasty was Bashar al-Asad's demand for the extension of pro-Syrian Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's presidential term. Even by Syrian standards, this was an unprecedented interference in Lebanese affairs. The involvement of Asef Shawkat in this decision is apparent from an anonymous Syrian academic, who suggested: "Politically speaking, Lahoud's extension was a mistake [...] it was a decision taken with the help of intelligence and military services."[77] When the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq al-Hariri, opposed the extension Bashar al-Asad made plain that Hariri risked both the future stability of Lebanon and his personal safety. In a Damascus meeting on August 26, 2004, Bashar al-Asad reportedly threatened to "break Lebanon over [Hariri's] head [...]" if he did not support the extension of Emile Lahoud's term.[78] With the Syrian military/security apparatus still firmly ensconced in Lebanon, Hariri had no choice but to comply with Asad's demand.

The Syrian regime's 'mafia-like' methods of maintaining its Lebanese assets, along with its policy of instigating chaos in Iraq tipped the balance of international opinion. Nine days after Asad and Hariri's Damascus meeting, the United Nations (UN) Security Council issued UN Resolution 1559 demanding the withdrawal of all Syrian military and security personnel from Lebanon.[79] This was explicitly related to the Syrian demand for the extension of Lahoud's presidential term, as the text of resolution 1559 shows:

> [The Security Council is] *mindful* of the upcoming presidential elections and *underlin*[*es*] the importance of free and fair elections according to Lebanese constitutional rules devised without foreign interference or influence.[80]

---

[77] *Financial Times*, March 24, 2005.

[78] UNIIIC, 'Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission,' Detlev Mehlis, Beirut, October 19, 2005, document available at: http://www.un.org/news/dh/docs/mehlisreport.pdf (accessed July 28, 2011).

[79] UN Security Council, S/RES/1559 (2004) 04-49892 (E), adopted by the Security Council, September 2, 2004.

[80] Ibid.

Demanding Syrian forces leave Lebanon was a major step considering that Syrian forces had been present since 1976 and that the United States had re-endorsed Syria's 'caretaker' role in Lebanon in return for Hafiz al-Asad's support to the United States in the 1991 Gulf War. The prospect of losing its hegemony in Lebanon was a body blow for the Asad dynasty. Notwithstanding the economic losses, a humiliating retreat from Lebanon would have the effect of boosting the morale of opposition forces, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and secular activists, which would further weaken the regime's domestic position. If Rafiq al-Hariri succeeded in engineering Syria's removal from Lebanon, his stature would be greatly enhanced as a symbol of resurgence of Sunni political power in Lebanon, a dangerous trend that could spill into Syria. It is easy to imagine therefore, that to a great extent, the Asad dynasty held Rafiq al-Hariri responsible for its reversing fortunes.

On February 14, 2005, five months after UN resolution 1559, a massive explosion killed Rafiq al-Hariri and twenty two other people as his motorcade travelled through Beirut. Responsibility was claimed by a fringe Islamic group, but Lebanese and international suspicion leaned heavily towards Syria's leaders. Initial investigations concluded that planning for the operation must have commenced several months before in order to carry out the attack and it was inconceivable that an operation of this complexity could have occurred without the knowledge of Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services.[81]

Rafiq al-Hariri's murder sparked an unprecedented sense of nationalism in Lebanon that encompassed a majority of the Sunni, Christian and Druze communities. Anger at Hariri's murder provided common cause which led to massive demonstrations demanding the end of Syrian domination. Significantly

[81] UNIIIC, 'Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission,' Detlev Mehlis, Beirut, October 19, 2005, document available at: http://www.un.org/news/dh/docs/mehlisreport.pdf, (accessed July 28, 2011).

the Shi'a community, now mainly represented by Hizballah, went against this trend.[82]

An interesting perspective of the impact of the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri came from Lebanon scholar William Harris' comparison of the Medici plot of 1478 and the 2005 al-Hariri assassination.[83] Bertrand Russell defined "the moral and political anarchy of fifteenth century Italy as "appalling."[84] In the early twenty-first century Alawites, through their association with the Asad dynasty, became embroiled in similarly morally bankrupt Machiavellian power struggles. In addition, the impact of the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri on the politics of the northern Levant was comparable to the Pazzi assassination attempt against Lorenzo Medici upon Northern Italy. In both cases the political status quo was violently shaken; however, neither produced the intended result. In the former case, the (failed) attempt to kill Lorenzo Medici and topple the 'tyranny' of the Medici in Florence actually produced the reverse; it strengthened the Medici hold on Florentine politics and devastated the Pazzi family's political and economic fortunes.[85] In the latter case, the Asad dynasty almost certainly masterminded the killing of Rafiq al-Hariri, to preserve its 'tyranny' in Lebanon. The assassination led instead to a humiliating exit from that country and even threatened to spell the demise of Asad rule in Syria. The most significant difference between these cases was however, that it was only the Pazzi clan and its individual associates that experienced the 'blowback' from the Medici plot. In the latter case the repercussions threatened to radically alter the situation of the entire Syrian Alawite community.

---

[82] Roula Khalaf, 'International pressure has forced Damascus to contemplate a humbling retreat,' *Financial Times*, March 24, 2005.

[83] William Harris, 'Crisis in the Levant: Lebanon at Risk,' *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol.18, No.2, 2007, p. 39.

[84] Russell, 1946, p. 481.

[85] Lauro Martines, *April Blood: Florence and the Plot against the Medici*, (London: Pimlico, 2004).

The Syrian regime strongly resisted the calls for its departure from Lebanon and there was an historic symmetry to their initial attempts to salvage their situation. Twenty-nine years after Syria entered Lebanon to intervene in Muslim-Christian fighting, according to many Lebanese, the Asad dynasty tried to reignite violence between Muslims and Christians.[86] Three bombs exploded in Christian areas, including at New Jdeidaeh on March 19, 2005 and in a shopping centre at Kaslik on March 23, 2005.[87] This was possibly an attempt to split the anti-Syrian Sunni-Christian coalition and show that Syria was still required to ensure Lebanese stability. In addition, anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians and journalists were targeted in a ruthless assassination campaign aimed at silencing the Lebanese opposition.[88]

Lebanese opposition, now under the name 'March 14,'[89] remained unified however; a major factor was the role of Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, who stated: "Hariri was the basic pillar of the opposition; my job now is to keep the opposition united." [90] Jumblat's central role in fostering a cross-communal Lebanese coalition starkly contradicted the efforts of the Asad regime to promote sectarian divisions. In the 1970s Kamal Jumblat had also attempted to integrate the Druze in a non-sectarian Lebanese social coalition but ran afoul of Asad dynasty interests. Yet the Druze community is very similar to the Alawites in terms of the ambiguity of their religion and their historic marginalization in Levantine politics. Hence it is paradoxical that the non-sectarian nationalism that was erupting in Lebanon was exactly the type of development that most Syrian Alawites hoped for. This of course would curtail Alawite reliance on the Asad dynasty for

---

[86] 'Lebanon and Syria: Who will blink first?'*Economist*, March 31, 2005.

[87] *Financial Times*, March 24, 2005; *Naharnet*, Beirut, March 23, 2005; *Economist*, March 31, 2005.

[88] William Harris, 'Lebanon's Day in Court,' *Foreign Affairs*, June 30, 2011, http://www.Foreignaffairs.com/articles/67971/william-harris/lebanons-day-in-court; see also 'Mandate and Jurisdiction,' Special Tribunal for Lebanon, official website, http://www.stl-tsl.org/section/AbouttheSTL.

[89] 'March 14' was the date when a massive demonstration, involving over a million people, was staged in Beirut demanding an end to Syria's role in Lebanon.

[90] *Financial Times*, March 24, 2005.

community security. Thus the social revolution that was occurring in Lebanon after February 2005 may have sparked envy, or possibly even hope, among Syrian Alawites, but conversely, would have been viewed with tremendous concern in the Presidential Palace in Damascus. In justifying its authoritarian rule in Syria and the retention of the emergency laws sectarian conflict in Lebanon and Iraq was extremely helpful to the Asad regime. This was demonstrated by a Damascus merchant who said in June 2005, "of course we all want change, but when you ask at what cost we all shut up."[91]

Walid Jumblat joined the Lebanese opposition, not because of any personal ideological convictions, but rather out of what he felt was the best interests of his community. Since the murder of his father Kamal, Walid Jumblat had led the Lebanese Druze with extreme pragmatism according to prevailing power structures; this had usually meant aligning with Syrian interests. Thus for Jumblat, who has been described as a 'weather vane' of Lebanese politics,[92] to turn against the Asad dynasty in 2005 was an early sign that that the Syrian regime's power in the region was starting to weaken.

Intense international and Lebanese pressure left little option for the Syrian regime but to comply with UN Resolution 1559 and remove all its troops from Lebanon. On April 26, 2005, the last Syrian troops left Lebanon after a twenty nine year stay. In a symbolic gesture, a group of Lebanese watching the last Syrian convoy cross the border broke a large ceramic jar, invoking the Arab superstition for keeping unwanted guests from returning.[93] At this juncture the odds of Syria regaining its hegemony in Lebanon appeared small. The political, economic and strategic benefits that the Asad dynasty gained from controlling its Lebanese western flank were seemingly lost. The combination of an independent and potentially hostile Lebanon, an openly hostile United States in Iraq, and a restive

---

[91] 'Syria under Bashar Assad, One of the last survivors of a dying breed,' *Economist*, June 16, 2005.

[92] See Andrew Lee Butters, 'Surrendering to Hizballah,' *Time Magazine*, May 12, 2008.

[93] 'Last Syrian Soldiers Depart Lebanon,' *The Washington Post*, April 27, 2005.

population at home, equated to a much weakened position for Bashar al-Asad's regime.

Besides geo-strategic, political and economic losses the Asad dynasty faced a new and previously unknown factor in Middle East politics, the nascent international justice system. Contrary to previous political assassinations, like those against Kamal Jumblat, Bashir Gemayal, and Saleh al-Din al-Bitar, which went uninvestigated and unresolved, international actors committed strongly to punish the perpetrators of Rafiq al-Hariri's murder. The fury of al-Hariri's powerful international allies, such as the Saudi Arabian royal family and the French President Jacque Chirac, coupled with the United States strong desire to penalize the Syrian regime for its destabilising role in Iraq, no doubt, helped propel the adoption of UN resolution 1595. This resolution, adopted on April 7, 2005, authorised the formation of the International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIIC) charged with investigating not only the al-Hariri murder but also any associated murders.[94] The initial appointee to head UNIIIC was a German Judge named Detlev Mehlis. Mehlis brought impressive credentials in solving international terrorism cases, notable amongst which was the case of Carlos the Jackal.[95]

In the course of his investigations Detlev Mehlis became conscious of rumours from Syria that the Alawite community was extremely anxious about the UN investigation and the implications for their security. There were reports of Alawite-Ismaili fighting at Qadmus, and in Latakia, Alawites demonstrated against the dangerous situation the regime had created.[96] If the Asad dynasty was toppled, Alawites felt they would be faced with a revanchist Sunni Syrian majority, poised to unleash three and a half decades of pent up frustration and

---

[94] UN Security Council, S/RES/1595 (2005), 05-29998(E), April 7, 2005.

[95] 'Profile: UN investigator of Hariri killing a 'tenacious terrier', *Lebanon Wire*, October 21, 2005, http://www.lebanonwire.com/1005/05102130AFP.asp '; see also John Follain, *Jackal*, (New York: Arcade, 1998), pp. 237-238.

[96] Detlev Mehlis, interview with the author, Dunedin, May 12, 2009.

even the score from Hama. In October 2005, a young Murshidi man told the American journalist Anthony Shadid: "They [the Alawites] worry about the regime and the accusations against the regime [...] what would they do if the regime collapsed?" Another Alawite respondent told Shadid that in the event of regime collapse: "The people in Damascus will return to the village and they'll find protection with their people." [97] It seemed the reckless policies and miscalculations of the Asad regime, including Bashar al-Asad and his key advisors such as Asef Shawkat, threatened to not only bring the full reckoning of the international community down on the regime, but also expose the whole Syrian Alawite community to their fears of a Sunni resurgence from the regime's collapse.

Alawite anxiety in 2005 would have been exacerbated further when the regime's apparent weakness gave encouragement to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to renew its opposition to the Syrian regime. The day after Syria's decision to retreat from Lebanon was announced, the Islamist organization's leader, Dr Hassan Howeidy, made a demand from Jordan for democratic elections and a new constitution in Syria, warning, "if the situation continues, potentially there is great interior pressure, as yet unrevealed, that will cause savage behaviour – as has happened in the past."[98] This was an explicit warning about possible renewed Sunni-Alawite violence, and likely referred to the struggles of 1976-1982. Social pressures in Syria were not necessarily religion based, however, but rather stemmed from socio-economic and political frustration among large portions of all Syria's communities. In the Alawite collective memory, however, Howeidy's remarks may have recalled the numerous violent repressions of the past against their community by Sunni Muslims. Also, although most Alawites were excluded from any benefits or role in Syria's political system, Howeidy still

---

[97] Anthony Shadid 'Death of Syrian Minister Leaves a Sect Adrift in a Time of Strife,' *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

[98] Lucy Ashton, 'Syria's retreat from Lebanon emboldens Islamist opposition,' *Financial Times*, May 6, 2005.

placed the Alawites together as a single dominant group when he added, "All the problems in Syria are because the power is not with parties but with the Alawites [...] the majority of Muslims hate following Alawite rule."[99]

To be sure, the domestic stability of the Asad dynasty still rested with Alawites in the military and security apparatus. During the rule of Hafiz al-Asad, statements from the Muslim Brotherhood singling out the Alawite community and threatening sectarian retribution, had only served to rally Alawites around the Asad dynasty and bolster 'asabiyya. Considering however, the signs of discord among Alawite security elites in 2004-2005, some Alawites began to doubt the capability of the Asad dynasty, under Bashar, to protect their community against such threats. In this context the possibility of a coup by influential Alawites emerged. An anonymous Syrian political analyst flagged this possibility, telling the *New York Times*, "Either Bashar will have to make his coup, or someone will make it against him."[100]

For many Alawites, Bashar al-Asad, who was born and raised in Damascus and had married a Sunni, seemed detached from their community.[101] Conversely, 'old guard' figures such as Ghazi Kana'an still commanded tremendous respect in the mountain villages of the Alawite region as a protector of Alawite interests. There was potential therefore, for an Alawite Maqaddam, like Kana'an, to establish a separate powerbase among the Alawite community. According to Middle East analyst Gary Gambill, the United States was led to believe by anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians that Kana'an was the only man capable of assuming control in Syria in a post-Asad Syria without a descent into sectarian strife.[102]

---

[99] *Financial Times*, May 6, 2005.

[100] Michael Slackman, 'Fearing an Iraq in a Post-Asad Syria,' *New York Times*, November 6, 2005; In 2005, Daniel Byman raised the possibility of a coup by one of the 'Alawite Barons', see: Daniel L. Byman, 'The Implications of Leadership Change in the Arab World,' *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 120, No. 1, 2005.

[101] See Batatu, 1999, p. 223.

[102] Gary C. Gambill, 'Why did Kanaan die?' *The National Post*, Toronto, October 17, 2005, available at: *Mideast Monitor*, http://www.mideastmonitor.org/gambill/051017.htm.

Another figure, with no powerbase and pushed to the fringes of the regime, but who possessed immense capability and experience in Syrian and Middle East political affairs was the vice-president, Abd al-Halim Khaddam. Following the departure from Syria in 1998 of the very 'professional' Hikmat Shihabi,[103] Kana'an and Khaddam remained two of the last key figures from the previous regime capable of challenging Bashar and forming a viable alternative.

A Kana'an-Khaddam combine could have been the Alawites best chance for retaining key community interests of physical and socio-economic security. Kana'an possessed sufficient competence and respect among Alawites to coordinate the various Mukhabarat branches and keep control of the Sunni majority. Khaddam skillfully helped facilitate the retention of an Alawite led regime in Syria for over three decades, all the while providing an important Sunni face to the regime. In many ways Abd al-Halim Khaddam had long been a good servant of Alawite interests. Significantly, both Kana'an and Khaddam (along with Hikmat Shihabi) enjoyed good relations with the late Rafiq al-Hariri. Khaddam was the only member of the Syrian regime who attended the funeral of the former Lebanese Prime Minister in Beirut.[104]

After returning from Rafiq al-Hariri's funeral, Abd al-Halim Khaddam's position in Syria became increasingly difficult, he and his family were under constant surveillance, and he found himself ostracized. Khaddam chose the tenth Ba'ath party regional conference in June 2005 to announce his resignation, accompanied by a scathing condemnation of recent regime policy after which, he immediately left Syria for Paris.[105] Khaddam's departure from Syria seemed less a panicked flight than a calculated tactical move. Khaddam's first step was to ally with another 'old guard' figure in exile, Hikmat Shihabi, and he purportedly

[103] Esther Pan, 'Syria's Leaders,' *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 10, 2006; Although Shihabi was 'rehabilitated' shortly afterwards, his career was effectively terminated in 1998.

[104] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Interview with the author.

[105] Gary C. Gambill, 'Dossier: Abd al-Halim Khaddam,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1, No.1, February 2006.

maintained contact with Ghazi Kana'an in Syria.[106] On the morning of October 12, 2005, Ghazi Kana'an was found dead in his office at the Ministry of the Interior. State media reported that he had committed suicide.[107] Many observers deemed it more likely that Kana'an was executed at the orders of the Syrian regime.[108] Although it is impossible to determine how Kana'an died, in either case, a major consequence of Ghazi Kana'an's demise was that the last prominent Alawite with potential to challenge Bashar al-Asad was removed.

By the end of 2005 the Asad dynasty had avoided an internal coup but was reduced to a small and isolated clique. Bashar al-Asad was at the top but remained influenced by his brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat. Bashar's brother Maher al-Asad was very influential as the commander of the Republican Guard, the key praetorian unit since the downgrading of the Defense Companies in 1984. How much influence female members of the family had, including Bushra al-Asad (Bashar's older sister and Shawkat's wife), and Anisa Makhlouf (Bashar's mother) is difficult to establish. Bushra al-Asad is apparently a strong willed and intelligent individual who could have been a candidate for the presidency if not for her gender.[109]

A new element in the power structure, not evident in the former stage of the Asad dynasty, was the establishment of a corporate wing to the regime. This role fell to the Makhlouf clan of Bashar's mother and was led by Rami Makhlouf.[110] Rami Makhlouf had already amassed a vast fortune in the first few years of Bashar's rule through business monopolies, such as the mobile networks

---

[106] Ibid.

[107] 'Ghazi Kanaan Shoots Himself Dead Ahead of U.N. Report on Hariri's Murder,' *Naharnet*, Beirut, October 12, 2005, available at: http://old.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&0433802B18F56720C2257098003F78DD.

[108] See for example, Joshua Landis, 'Ghazi Kanaan – the Most Senior Alawi – Suicide? Or was it Murder?' SyriaComment.com, available at: http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/10/ghazi-kanaan-most-senior-alawi-suicide.htm.

[109] Mohamad Daoud, 'Dossier: Bushra Assad,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1, No. 3, September-October 2006.

[110] See Gary Gambill, ed. 'Dossier: Rami Makhlouf,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 3, No. 1, January-March 2008.

mentioned previously. On the periphery of this inner clique were other Asad cousins such as the Shaleesh clan, who oversaw business interests, in conjunction with the regime, in such areas as smuggling contraband in and out of Iraq.[111]

Ramifications of Radical Regime Policies

Although Bashar al-Asad and his inner core had succeeded in consolidating their hold on power and seeing off potential adversaries such as Rafiq al-Hariri, Abd al-Halim Khaddam and Ghazi Kana'an, the process of achieving this consolidation had left them extremely isolated and vulnerable both internationally and domestically. On the international front, the UN investigation of the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri posed a clear danger to the regime if its top officials, or even the President himself, were found culpable. This could destroy the legitimacy of the Ba'athist regime, bring crippling sanctions, and possibly even a UN authorised intervention in Syria. The progress of international justice would prove a slow process, so the threat of the UN investigation was not imminent; however, in 2005/2006 the threat posed by the UNIIIC appeared very real. Domestically, the demise of the influential Alawite figure, Ghazi Kana'an, meant that the regime severely tested the loyalty of a great portion of the Alawite community who already felt abandoned and betrayed by the policy directions and actions of the regime.

Abd al-Halim Khaddam pointed out that it cannot automatically be assumed that Kana'an was assassinated;[112] however, many Alawites were convinced that he was ordered killed by Bashar al-Asad, adversely affecting their approval of the regime. At Kana'an's funeral in his home village of B'hamra, women wailed, "Why did you kill him?"[113] A relative of Kana'an was disparaging of the idea of suicide: "he was a man of confrontation, suicide is an escape - he

---

[111] Shmuel Bar, 2006, pp. 28, 44; see also: US House of International Relations Committee, HIRC, 2004, 'Syria' Documents, 2 and 6.

[112] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Interview with the author.

[113] Kim Ghattas, 'Syria's minority Alawites fear for future,' *BBC*, London, November, 22, 2005.

wasn't a man to run away from something."[114] Alawite discontent after the death of Ghazi Kana'an was demonstrated by Kana'an's brother Ali, who attacked the regime by going public with his belief that Bashar al-Asad, his brother Maher and Asef Shawkat were responsible for Rafiq al-Hariri's death. He was found dead on November 9, 2006, (once again 'officially' by suicide) on the Tartous-Latakia rail line.[115] This brutality against the Kana'ans, a fellow Kalbiyya clan from the town of B'hamra, would not be easily forgiven.[116] It was this type of crumbling Alawite 'asabiyya, which posed the greatest danger to the future of the Asad dynasty.

Hafiz al-Asad also oversaw politically motivated murders, which were no more morally defensible than the actions of Bashar's regime; however, from a purely political perspective a distinction can be made. Hafiz al-Asad sought to suppress suggestions of Alawite sectarianism as part of cloaking the role of the Alawite community as the critical foundation of his regime. This was arguably a contributing motive in the assassinations of Kamal Jumblat and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. Bashar al-Asad and his key advisors are suspected of conducting political assassinations purely from the point of view of protecting their own interests, even if at the expense of Alawites. Thus it seemed that the Asad dynasty was at odds with the Alawite majority and, true to Ibn Khaldun's words, it appeared many of Bashar al-Asad's "own people, in fact, bec[a]me his enemies,"[117]

In this context of diverging Alawite-Asad dynasty interests, the Alawite community had a potential opportunity to exit its 'Faustian bargain' with the Asad dynasty in 2006. Abd al-Halim Khaddam, now based in Paris, understood the Syrian regime better than anyone else, having developed an intimate knowledge of its structure and mechanics over the course of his long political

[114] Anthony Shadid, 'Death of a Syrian Minister Leaves A Sect Adrift in Time of Strife, '*The Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

[115] *Naharnet*, Beirut, November 10, 2006.

[116] A member of the Kana'an family showed little affection for the Asads during a conversation with the author in Latakia in 2011.

[117] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 146.

career. He believed in 2005-2006 that the regime's Alawite powerbase was possibly wavering and if he could remove this 'keystone' in its power structure the dynasty might fall. This required alleviating Alawite anxiety about a sectarian backlash against their community in the absence of the Asad regime.

On December 30, 2005 Abd al-Halim Khaddam launched his counterattack against the Asad dynasty in an interview with *Al-Arabiya* television. He proclaimed his knowledge of the Syrian regime's responsibility for the Hariri and related assassinations, and his belief that the new ruling clique was leading Syria to ruin.[118] This testimony of a long time regime insider like Khaddam, was a heavy blow to the Syrian regime which added to its isolation and vulnerability. It was Khaddam's next move however that posed the biggest threat to Bashar al Asad. By joining forces with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, now led by Ali Bayanouni, and forming the National Salvation Front (NSF) on March 16, 2006, a viable opposition to the Syrian regime was created. The partnership of Abd al-Halim Khaddam and Ali Bayanouni gave the NSF potency in two important ideologies, Ba'athism and Islamism, and therefore held potential to gain significant traction in Syria. Admittedly, Ba'athism had waned in terms of its genuine popular appeal, yet Alawites still clung to its secular and socialist principles as a means to alleviate their sectarian insecurity.

Khaddam was certain of the success of the NSF; in the press conference at the formation of the movement he said he expected an uprising in Syria "in a few months." "Bashar al-Asad is making a lot of mistakes and he's digging himself into a hole."[119] Having assisted Hafiz al-Asad in the delicate balancing act of retaining Alawite support without overly antagonizing the Syrian majority, Khaddam understood the key factor to regime change was the position of Alawites. Any uprising that was uniformly opposed by Alawites in the

---

[118]Gary C. Gambill, 'Dossier: Abd al-Halim Khaddam,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1, No. 1, February 2006.

[119] *Reuters*, March 17, 2006.

military/security apparatus had little chance of success, a lesson harshly learnt at Hama in 1982.

Hence, in early June 2006, Abd al-Halim Khaddam publically committed to protect the Alawite minority against any potential backlash against their community in a post-Asad Syria.[120] Although Sunni himself, Khaddam is better defined according to his secular Ba'athist outlook, which was not the type of authority from whom Alawites required guarantees on their future security. Alawites required this from a Sunni Muslim leader, the group from which they could expect to suffer renewed discrimination and possible retribution in a post-Asad Syria. On August 17, 2006, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Bayanouni delivered such a message via an *al-Jazeera* television interview:

> The Alawites in Syria are part of the Syrian people and comprise many national factions... [The] present regime has tried to hide behind this community and mobilize it against Syrian society. But I believe that many Alawite elements oppose the regime, and there are Alawites who are being repressed. Therefore, I believe that all national forces and all components of the Syrian society, including the sons of the Alawite community, must participate in any future change operation in Syria.[121]

Dissection of this message reveals a significant understanding of the political situation of Alawites, which perhaps indicates the influence of Khaddam on the choice of language. Bayanouni rejected the idea of sectarian particularism, present in previous MB statements about the Alawites; instead he said the Alawites 'comprise many national factions.' Secondly, he makes an implicit distinction between the 'present regime' and the previous Asad regime, a possible attempt to

[120] 'Exiled Syrian opposition pledges to protect Alawite minority,' *Financial Times*, June 5, 2006.

[121] *Al-Jazeera*, broadcast August 17, 2006, cited in 'The Bayanouni - Khaddam Link-up: Is the Opposition Real Now?' *Syria comment*, http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2006/03/bayanouni-khaddam-link-up-_114264946582158617.htm.

disconnect Bashar's regime from the strong loyalty many Alawites felt for Hafiz al-Asad and his policies. Where many Alawites felt the late President Asad strongly defended Alawite interests, Bayanouni suggested the present regime exploits the community in order to preserve itself. Finally, Bayanouni invited Alawites to join as equal partners in a civil uprising to bring 'change' for Syria.

The tone of Ali Bayanouni's message was radically different from previous Muslim Brotherhood pronouncements, which had implicitly, and explicitly, labelled Alawites as heretics, usurpers and unified in their complicity with the Asad dynasty. Bayanouni made a distinction between those Alawites closely connected with the regime and the rest of the Alawite community. This resonates with the idea of a division of the Alawite 'asabiyya into two branches: those attached to the inner core whose 'asabiyya remained intact for agnatic and material reasons, and those whose 'asabiyya for the Asad dynasty was upheld only by their insecurity about a Sunni dominated state. Considering the reduction in size of the former group, due to the directions pursued by Bashar al-Asad in his first six years of power, it can be assumed that the latter group was the larger.

Bayanouni's outreach to the Alawite majority was a similar concession to Alawite aspirations for a secure place in Syrian society as the *fatwa* of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Husayni, in 1936.[122] At that time Alawites felt their choice was either unity with Muslim Syria, or autonomy under French guardianship. The choice in 2006 was unity with the other communities in a new post-Asad Syria, or to hope for continued protection under the teetering Asad dynasty.

Several factors weighed on this opportunity for a major shift in the political direction of the Alawite sect. First, what chance did the Asad dynasty have of surviving the UN investigations into the Hariri murder? If the dynasty was in fact doomed, a better option could have been to seek the best alternative for

[122] R. D. 'Une fatwa du Grand Mufti de Jérusalem sur les Alawîtes,' *Syria*, T. 22, Fasc. 3/4 (1941), p. 299, Institut Francais du Proche-Orient; Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46: 2, 2010, pp.185-186

community security in a new power reality as had occurred in 1936 when the prospect of continued French protection became unlikely.[123] Secondly however, the Asad dynasty for forty years had worked to ensure that no alternative source of political authority existed among the Alawite community. In contrast to 1936, when influential tribal leaders and shaykhs debated and decided on courses of action, in 2006 few (if any) authoritative decision makers existed outside of the Asad dynasty. The final factor was: could the Sunni majority actually be trusted to uphold an 'amnesty,' as offered by Bayanouni and Khaddam, and not seek violent retribution against the Alawite community for the Hama massacre and subsequent political repression?

The point could be raised that ordinary Alawites, especially those living in rural areas, may not be fully aware of, or understand, the complex challenges facing their community. This however, would be a misapprehension. As Abd al-Halim Khaddam told this writer, the average Syrian is politically aware, "they understand what is going on."[124] Ordinary Alawites are no exception to this, a fact borne out by this author's observations. An Alawite acquaintance of this writer, from the northern Jabal Sahiliyah who worked as a cleaner in Latakia, for example, knew the names, backgrounds and roles of every politician in a local newspaper. Also he was sure whose late model Mercedes convertible it was that we passed in the business district of Latakia, saying: *"hathi sayyara ibn 'am al ra'is - 'Asad - maktabu hon"* ("this is the President's cousin's car- an Asad- his office is here"). Although Alawites are not ignorant of political affairs and their implications, the lack of community leadership inhibits the ability to mobilize effectively and take political steps in the community's interests independently of the Asad dynasty.

---

[123] This type of political shift due to new political realities can also perhaps explain the realignment of Walid Jumblat and the Lebanese Druze.

[124] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Interview with the author.

The most likely approach for Alawites was to withdraw into the security of their tribal and family groups and wait to see what would transpire and, if necessary, activate their traditional tactic and fall back to their mountain redoubts. An Alawite village grocer, at the height of the regime crisis in October 2005, said that in the event of conflict in the country, "the people in Damascus will return to the village, and they'll find protection with their people…they're going to hide behind the rocks and the stones. In the city there are no rocks and stones."[125]

In June 2006 the UN Security Council passed resolution 1686 which endorsed the UNIIIC report on the Hariri murder, extended the investigation's mandate, and expressed determination to hold "all those involved in this terrorist attack accountable."[126] One month later, on July 12, the Syrian regime's remaining Lebanese strategic ally, Hizballah, provoked Israel into a conflict in southern Lebanon.[127] This conflict, in which Hizballah kept the Israeli Defense Forces heavily engaged for thirty-four days,[128] provided a major boost to the Asad dynasty in several ways. It was a timely reminder for Syrians of the 'Khaldunian threat' posed by Israel and provided a rallying effect, comparable to the boosting effect for Hafiz al-Asad from the relative Syrian success in the 1973 October war.

Bashar sought to maximize the propaganda benefit of the 2006 war by strongly declaring his backing to the 'courageous resistance.' The Hizballah fighters were well provisioned and supported via Syria (and Iran),[129] a point that Bashar used to strike a blow at his enemies in the Arab world, especially the Saudi monarchy, going as far as calling them "half men" for their lack of support to Hizballah.[130] In view of the beneficial effects of the 2006 Lebanon War for the

[125] Anthony Shadid, *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

[126] UN Security Council, S/RES/1686 (2006), 06-39006 (E), June 15, 2006.

[127] UN Security Council, S/RES/1701 (2006), 06-46503 (E), August 11, 2006.

[128] For an analysis of the conduct of this conflict see, S. Biddle and J.A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign*, Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, September 2008.

[129] *Ha'aretz*, Israel, June 7, 2007.

[130] Esther Pan, 'Syria, Iran, and the Mideast Conflict,' *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 18, 2006, http://www.cfr.org/iran/syria-iran-mideast-conflict/p11122 (accessed September 1, 2011).

Syrian regime, it is reasonable to suspect that Bashar al-Asad's regime, with the consent of the Iranian regime, prompted Hizballah to provoke the hostilities with Israel. Speaking to this writer in 2009, Abd al-Halim Khaddam was certain of this interpretation: Bashar "has been using Hizballah in Lebanon to somehow remove the danger of the Tribunal" (investigation into the Hariri murder).[131] From 2006 onwards the 'resistance' ideology took on greater significance for Bashar al-Asad in buttressing his rule. He actively promoted himself in Syria alongside 'resistance' figures the Secretary General of Hizballah, Hasan Nasrallah and the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (see figure 10).

This was a significant deviation from the propaganda strategy of Hafiz al-Asad, who never included others in his personality cult apart from members of his family and occasional Islamic symbols.[132] This change in policy also represented a shift in the balance of power in the Syria-Iran-Hizballah alliance in favour of Iran and Hizballah. Where Hafiz al-Asad relied only on Alawite support to give domestic stability to his regime, which allowed him to follow a more independent foreign policy, Bashar, from the mid 2000s began to rely more heavily on his external Shi'ite Islamist allies. This development corresponds with Ibn Khaldun's theory that a declining dynasty moves away from his own group of origin and instead "seeks the help of clients and followers [...] and cares only for [its] new [allies]." [133] Bashar al-Asad's close allies, Hizballah and the Iranian regime, have their own political agenda, including extension of Islamic rule in Muslim countries, which does not match Alawite interests.

---

[131] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Interview with the author.

[132] For a full discussion of the personality cult of Hafiz al-Asad see: Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[133] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 146.

Figure 10. Damascus Poster Showing Leaders of the 'Resistance'



Source: the author, August 2009

By the end of 2006, several months after Abd al-Halim's prediction for a Syrian uprising, no such event had materialized. There was no evidence of Alawites joining opposition movements, or of any disloyalty among the military and security services. The effect of the 2006 Lebanon War no doubt played a part in this. But wiping away centuries of mistrust and hostility between Alawites and Sunnis was not going to happen overnight. Moreover, the fear of retaliation for Hama still lingered among Alawites, despite the efforts of opposition leaders like Khaddam and Bayanouni to dispel this. Syria would not emerge from international isolation for another two years but in the first real test of Alawite loyalty the resilience of sectarian 'asabiyya was clearly evident.

Overall, the period 2003-2007 was an incredibly difficult time for the Asad dynasty and the Alawite community. Bashar al-Asad's inexperience was starkly demonstrated by his tendency towards reckless behaviour. Regardless of whether

this was due to his own hubris or as a result of an impressionable character and faulty advice from those surrounding him, he brought the Asad dynasty perilously close to destruction. He critically upset the careful and firmly controlled equilibrium, established by his father, between Alawite interests and appeasement of the Sunni majority. True to Khaldunian predictions Bashar jeopardized many of the fundamental elements of Alawite support to his rule by 2007. When the opportunity arose, however, Alawites did not abandon the Asad dynasty. Why was this? The short answer is fear. Sectarian insecurity, a key factor that Ibn Khaldun failed to recognize in his theory for the decline of a group's 'asabiyya, was the critical ingredient that maintained the rule of the Asad dynasty. For Alawites the survival of the Asad dynasty meant some level of protection against Sunni fundamentalism, despite the paradoxical fact that the regime was directly and indirectly promoting an upsurge of Islamist sentiment. Overall, the politics of insecurity meant that Alawite 'asabiyya remained intact.

Alawite Socio-Economic Conditions under Bashar al-Asad

Throughout their history it has been an unfortunate reality that the Alawite community has only made a lasting imprint on the historical record during times of difficulty or conflict. For the centuries since their reduction to the Jabal Sahiliyah construction of an academic perspective on Alawite socio-economic circumstances has been limited to piecing together glimpses from, often calamitous, moments for the group, for example: the Jablah revolt and Mamluk repression; the short career of Ismail Khayr Bey and Ottoman repression in the nineteenth century; the unionist/separatist dilemma of 1936; the violent sectarian conflict of 1976 - 1982; and finally the Asad dynasty crisis of 2005-2006.

Outside these events, the Alawites become very hazy to scholars. After 2007 with the start of Asad dynasty reconsolidation, this pattern resumed and Alawites once again receded from view. As a result of this sporadic record of the Alawite community, there is a temptation to view the group as heterodox

religious extremists, violent insurgents (Jablah revolt), disordered and savage tribesmen (Ismail Khayr), or shadowy and ruthless security operatives ('sectarian Stasi'). The reality of this community is however, less dramatic than these depictions.

This section attempts to portray the everyday characteristics and dilemmas of this community in the twenty first century. In drawing out the ordinary aspects of the Alawite community, the tragic consequences of the politics of sectarian insecury are poignantly highlighted. Overall, the political system, which stems from the Alawite-Asad 'asabiyya, limits the potential of all Syrian people including the great majority of Alawites.

One major trend stands out when assessing general Alawite socio-economic circumstances under Bashar al-Asad. There is a widening income gap between Alawites who are well connected to the Asad dynasty, and those who are not. As discussed in chapter five, there has been a disparity in this regard since the beginning of the Asad dynasty, but the extent of this gap became extremely pronounced after 2000. Moreover, the size of the privileged Alawite elite shrunk as Bashar al-Asad withdrew into greater reliance on his trusted inner core of family and close friends. According to opposition sources, in 2007 the combined wealth of the regime inner circle, including the wider Makhlouf, Shaleesh and Asad families was approximately forty billion US dollars.[134] In the same year the total projected revenue of Syrian fiscal operations[135] was 442.5 billion Syrian Pounds (SP) (approximately 8 billion US dollars) while government debt stood at 725.7 billion Syrian pounds (13 billion US).[136] The 'corporatization of corruption,' among the dynasty's inner core, which Abd al-Halim described, reaches into the

---

[134] National Salvation Front (NSF), Website, available at: http://www.free-syria.com/en/ (accessed October 2, 2009).

[135] Fiscal operations are actions taken by the government to implement budgetary policies, such as revenue and expenditure measures, as well as issuance of public debt instruments and public debt management. Taken from: 'Glossary of Statistical Terms,' OECD, available at: http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=4470.

[136] IMF Country Report No.07/288, August 2007, p.33; figures are shown in 2007 exchange rates.

very heart of the Syrian economy. The Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS), for example, which controls nearly ninety percent of all deposits and controls most of Syria's foreign currency reserves, was in 2004 and 2006 listed internationally as a "financial institution of primary money laundering concern."[137]

Abd al-Halim Khaddam estimated in 2009 that the majority of wealth in Syria is under the control of around five hundred people.[138] This is possibly an exaggeration; however, in a country of over twenty-three million, even if the actual figure was double or triple Khaddam's estimation it still represents an enormous concentration of wealth in a few extended families. In considering only the Syrian Alawite population of around three million, it shows that the distribution of wealth is very unequal within that community. Official figures are not available for income distribution in Syria; therefore, evaluation of this aspect is only possible through primary and secondary qualitative observations. Extensive observation during the author's visits to Syria in 2009 and 2011 indicated that the great majority of Syrians, including Alawites, suffer very difficult economic circumstances. This stands in contrast to occasional signs of extreme wealth in the form of mansions and luxury vehicles.

The relative socio-economic security the rural Alawite majority had enoyed under Hafiz al-Asad waned as Bashar al-Asad shifted the focus of development toward the cities. For example, the new regime's liberalising economic reforms led to the reduction or cancellation of agricultural and fuel subsidies. In 2008 the price of diesel jumped from 7.3 SP to 25 SP per litre,[139] and agricultural subsidies have been cancelled in favour of arbitrary 'cash transfers.'[140]

---

[137] Matthew Levitt, 'Global Anti-Terrorism Financing Group Challenged by Syria's Application,' *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Watch, No.1238, May 31, 2007, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2609 ; see also: *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, Vol. II, 'Money Laundering and Financial Crimes,' US Department of State, pp.364-367.

[138] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Interview with the author.

[139] IMF Country Report, No. 10/86, 'Syrian Arab Republic: 2009 Article IV Consultation—Staff Report; and Public information Notice,' March, 2010, p. 10.

[140] Ibid. p. 8.

Compared to the rapid improvements for rural Alawites under Hafiz al-Asad, the extension of essential services like running water and electricity slowed. According to World Bank data, from 2000 to 2005 access to improved water sources in rural areas in Syria increased by only three percent.[141] On a visit in 2009 to the Murshidi Alawite village of Kdeen, this author observed that many houses still did not have electricity connected and water was stored inside houses in large drums. In the village of Jobat Berghal near the summit of the Jabal Sahiliyah, the school, sports club and community centre built in the 1970s and 1980s stood in disrepair or closed in 2005, and villagers still waited for the provision of running water.[142] This writer visited the town in 2011 and observed similar signs of infrastructural decline. For many Alawites it seemed the regime had abandoned them; for instance, a retired government employee from the village of Qarir complained: "It's like people don't even know we live in the country […] every person sitting in the chair of power cares about money, not about the people."[143]

Even in the Asad home town, Qurdaha, there are indications of the changing nature of the Alawite-Asad relationship. In 1986 there was a general flush of prosperity in Qurdaha with abundant construction and development projects underway. In 2009 and again in 2011, this writer gained the impression that the town had not advanced considerably in recent times and appeared somewhat rundown. There was no evidence of disproportionate wealth among most residents of the town, in fact the taxi driver who drove this author in 2009, was himself a local resident and a distant relative of the Asad family. In 1986, the Asad residence was located within Qurdaha, while in 2009 the palatial Asad residence stood some distance away atop a hill north of the town.

---

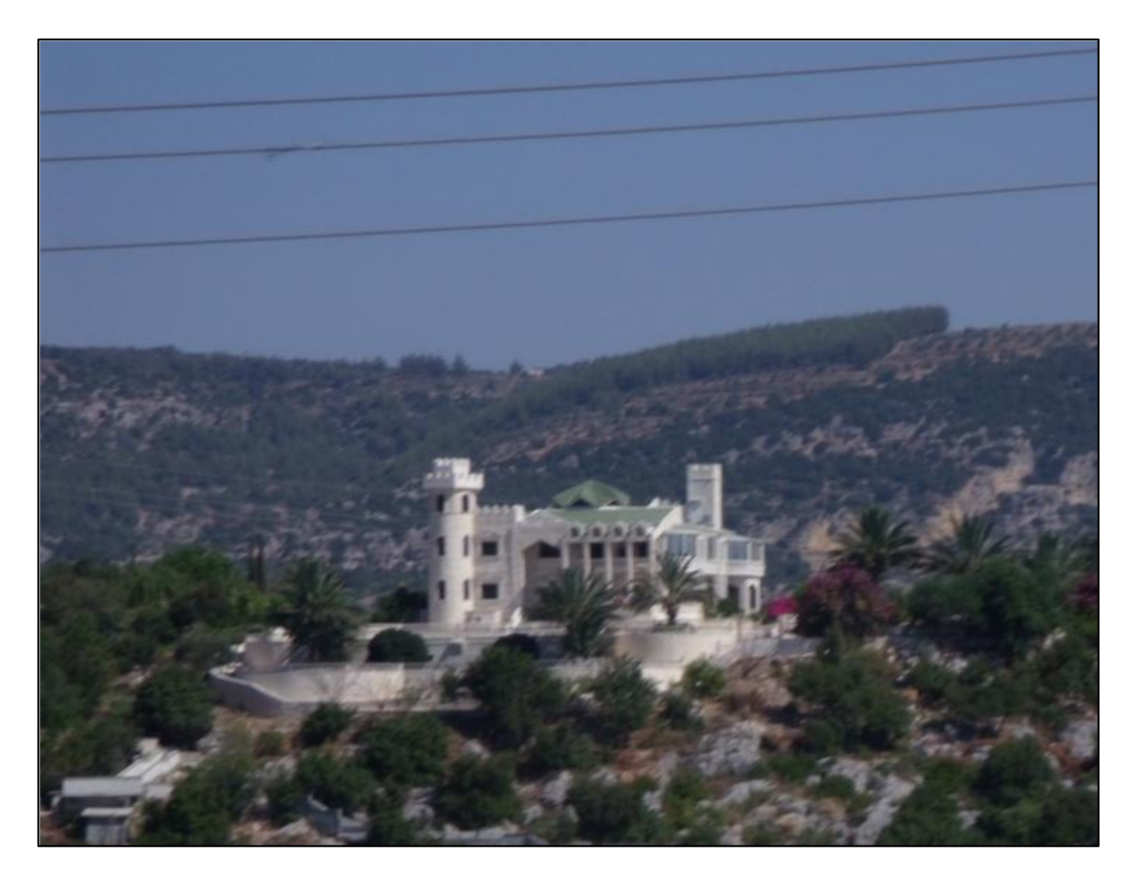
[141] World Bank Data, 'Syrian Arab Republic,' http://data.worldbank.org/country/syrian-arab-republic accessed April 12, 2012.

[142] *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

[143] Ibid.



Figure 11. The Asad Residence near Qurdaha



Source: the author, August 2009.

Also the *New York Times* correspondent who visited Qurdaha in 1986 did not mention the large elaborate Mosque that, in 2009, stood near the entrance to the town. Qurdaha is the only Alawite town, visited by this writer, to possess a mosque, a sure sign of its purely symbolic political function. It is ironic that the Latakia region's best supplied and cheapest liquor stores are located nearby.[144]

It is possible to see the changing nature of the Alawite-Asad dynasty relationship from this comparison between Qurdaha in 1986 and 2009. First, it seems symbolic of how the Asad dynasty distanced itself from ordinary Alawites, even those from the Kalbiyya tribe, that the Asad 'palace' was relocated away from the town (see figure 11.).

[144] The taxi driver who took this author to Qurdaha assumed the reason for travelling there was to purchase alcohol.

Figure 12. Mosque in Qurdaha



Source: the author, August 2009

Also, the way that development of Qurdaha township seemingly ground to a halt, indicates that the material benefits of power have further reduced to only the Asad family and its clique. The building of an elaborate mosque in Qurdaha is more representative of the political priorities of the regime than providing infrastructure for the Alawite community (see figure 12.). On entering the Mosque on this writer's second visit to Qurdaha in 2011, it was found completely empty and the carpets showed little sign of frequent use. The Asad regime's tightening alliance with the Islamist Iranian regime and Hizballah, no doubt, makes it politically expedient to provide suitable religious facilities for their frequent visits.

In Damascus, Alawite populated satellite suburbs like Ashir Warwar appear largely undeveloped and the residents display similar, if not worse, signs of poverty as those living in the mountain villages of the Latakia region.

Meanwhile the regime elite live in luxury, with more lavish lifestyles than at any other stage in the Asad dynasty. Despite this widening socio-economic gap between the Alawite community in general, and the Asad dynasty, many Sunni Damascenes generalize about Alawite dominance over their city.

A study on contemporary Damascene social identity by Christa Salamandra illustrates the extent to which Sunnis resent what they see as the degradation of Damascus's cultural and economic heritage by the 'invading' Alawites.[145] A young Sunni translator from Damascus demonstrated this:

> I've noticed over the past five years that I have become proud of being Damascene. I see this also with my father, who was one of the founders of the Ba'ath Party. The Ba'athists used to think Syrians were all simply Syrian. Now many of them regret this. Now they feel that they are distinct from all the villagers, especially the 'Alawis. They think the 'Alawis may have the money, they may have the power, but we have the tradition.[146]

The feeling that Alawites have all the money and the power is no doubt fueled by the extravagant wealth and lifestyles of conspicuous Alawites close to the Asad dynasty like Rami Makhlouf. This echoes the resentment that Syrians felt about the extravagant wealth of Rifa'at al-Asad in the 1970s and 1980s. In that case however, Hafiz al-Asad boosted his own popularity and the stability of the Asad dynasty by being seen to crack down on the corruption of his brother culminating in his exile. Thus far, Bashar has made no such moves against his family members.

Despite the false presumption by some Sunnis that Alawites in general are politically and financially dominant, their perceived inferiority in Syrian society is shown by the comment above, whereby, they are still referred to as 'villagers'

---

[145] Salamandra, Christa, 'Consuming Damascus: Public Culture and the Construction of Social Identity,' in W. Armbrust, (ed.) *Mass Mediations, New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 182-202.

[146] Salamandra, 2000, p. 191.

lacking in 'tradition.' This mentality recalls historic perceptions of the Alawites and indicates that the sect had not made much progress elevating their status in Syrian society during the Asad dynasty. An anonymous Alawite writer from Latakia summed up the modern situation of Alawites:

> They say that this regime is 'Alawi, but I don't think so. Or you can say that there is a coalition of 'Alawis who are benefitting, but not the rest […] If you ask a Damascene, he will answer in a way that reflects his prejudices. He will say that they [the Alawites] have come and dominated everything, stolen everything and so on. But those who came in from other areas live in the suburbs, in illegal sub-standard housing, while those in the centre are [Sunni] Damascene and Christian.[147]

When asked in 2005 if the Asad dynasty benefitted the Alawite community disproportionately, a retired government employee from Jobat Berghal, near the summit of the Jabal Sahiliyah, responded angrily, "The opposite! The opposite! We're all Alawites here and when you come here, you can't find anything."[148] In this rare outburst the middle aged man bemoaned the corruption in the country that protects the privileged few, while he still hand-pumps water into his home. He made a clear distinction between the first stage of the dynasty and the current ruler, "President Hafiz al-Asad said it was the right of any citizen to raise his voice if he sees injustice [...] now they say it's not your right to talk."[149] These rare statements from an Alawite source give an indication of declining 'asabiyya at the community grass roots.

The state of modern Sunni-Alawite relations can also be established from the lack of inter-marriage that occurs between the sects.[150] In one Damascus

[147] Ibid. pp.188-189.

[148] *Washington Post*, October 31, 2005.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Bashar al-Asad is of course a notable exception to this.

example in 2007, a Sunni girl tried to marry an Alawite; the girl's family refused and when she ran away with him they hunted her down to "erase the dishonour."[151] Continued hostility, resentment and misunderstanding between the Alawite and Sunni communities could be seen as part of a general rise of sectarian particularism extending across the Middle East. This was partly the result of the political instability in Iraq and Lebanon but also because of prevalent economic hardship and related perceptions around disparities in wealth distribution.[152]

A major impact on Alawite socio-economic conditions was the outbreak of severe drought in Syria beginning in the summer of 2007.[153]

Figure 13. Parched terraced fields in the Northern Jabal Sahiliyah in 2009



Source: the author, August 2009

[151] 'Honour crime fear of Syria women,' *BBC*, London, October 12, 2007.

[152] Marwan Kabalan, 'Sowing the seeds of discord,' *Gulf News*, Dubai, July 6, 2007.

[153] UNDP Report, 'The Impact of the World Economic Downturn on Syrian Economy, Inequality and Poverty,' November2, 2009, p. 27;'Syria: Harvest hit by poor weather, inefficient farming practices,' *Reuters*, Damascus, July 5, 2007.

It was evident during field work by this researcher in the Jabal Sahiliyah in 2009 that Alawites struggled to maintain their limited incomes from small agriculture and tobacco growing. Throughout the Jabal Sahiliyah terraced fields and orchards showed signs of a serious water shortage (see figure 13). This factor will be elaborated further in Chapter Seven.

Despite facing severe socio-economic challenges, the 'asabiyya of ordinary Alawites was under strain but intact. In general, Alawites this writer met in the Jabal Sahiliyah appeared positive in their assessment of Bashar al-Asad.[154] Ironically, conversations invariably returned to their economic predicaments. For example, in 2009 a twenty four year old Alawite acquaintance pleaded with me to buy him some shoes as his were worn through. Yet when I showed him a souvenir cap that I had bought from Qala'at al-Hosn (Krac de Chevalier), with the words 'I love Bashar' emblazoned, he told me that the President was "*qua'is*" (excellent) and asked if he could have the cap. Conversely a Sunni taxi driver from Homs, who was much better off than my Alawite friend, angrily tried to throw the cap out the window when I showed it to him a day earlier. Why was my Alawite friend so admiring of Bashar al-Asad who lived in luxury, while he could not afford to buy shoes? According to Ibn Khaldun, group 'asabiyya declines as "profits are distributed amongst [...] the privileged few."[155] Despite growing discontent among Alawites, in general, their support for the Asad dynasty did not however appear to be declining to any serious extent. Their sectarian insecurity seemed to cause Alawites to overlook inequality and injustice within Syria and their own community. To further understand this phenomenon it is helpful to examine the situation of an Alawite population outside Syria.

The 'Precarious' Security of the Lebanese Alawites

[154] Given the political conditions in Syria in 2009 and 2011, I always tried to take indirect approaches in asking about the President and politics in general.

[155] Lacoste, 1984, pp. 113-114.

In Tripoli in Northern Lebanon there is a small Alawite population of around 60,000 to 90,000.[156] Like their Syrian counterparts, Lebanese Alawites originally resided on the rural margins. After 1976 they began moving into Tripoli from the Akkar region north of Tripoli, protected by the presence of their co-sectarians in the Syrian Army stationed in Lebanon.[157] In March 2011 this writer visited the Tripoli suburb, Jabal Mohsen, where most Lebanese Alawites live. It was evident that the residents ranked among the poorer socio-economic strata of Lebanese society. Despite the small size and poverty of the Lebanese branch of the Alawite community it plays an important part in Syrian political equations. To Syrian Alawites the situation of their Lebanese co-sectarians seems to illustrate the precarious situation of Alawites not under the direct protection of the Asad dynasty. This perception stems from the frequent Sunni-Alawite violence that occurs in Tripoli.

After Sunni-Alawite hostilities in Syria were terminated at Hama in 1982 many of the Muslim Brothers, and their supporters, fled across the border and found refuge amongst Tripoli's Sunni community and in Palestinian (PLO) bases.[158] Here they confronted the militant and openly Alawite, Arab Democratic Party (ADP),[159] led by Ali Eid. Clashes in Tripoli commenced in June 1983 after attacks on Lebanese Alawites and Syrian soldiers led to strong Alawite reprisals against Sunnis.[160] Thereafter intractable sectarian hostility emerged between the suburbs of Jabal Mohsen and the neighbouring Sunni suburb of Bab al-Tebbaneh. Intermittent outbreaks of Sunni-Alawite violence have been a feature in Tripoli for nearly three decades.

---

[156] There is no official data on the size of the Lebanese Alawite population. This estimate is taken from averaging the 2008 estimates of Riad Yazbeck (see next note) and the 'Islamic Institute of New York,' available at, http://iiny.org/data.asp?lang=3&id=6777 (accessed Sept. 2, 2011).

[157] *New York Times*, June 21, 1982; Although, similarly to the Syrian Alawites they retained links back to their rural villages.

[158] '3 Syrians Killed in Ambush in Lebanon,' *New York Times*, June 21, 1982.

[159] The ADP has also been known unofficially as the 'Pink Panthers' owing to the colour of their militia. uniforms.

[160] *New York Times*, June 21, 1982.

The latest episode of intensive Alawite-Sunni conflict in Tripoli occurred between June 21 and September 8 of 2008.[161] In an attempt to stem the fighting and draw Lebanese Alawites away from their reliance on the Asad regime, the leader of the Lebanese Sunni community, Sa'ad al-Hariri,[162] tried to alleviate Alawite insecurity: "We are both Lebanese and we will not let anyone tamper with us." [163] Nonetheless, the ingrained insecurity of Tripoli's Alawites was revealed in the words of ADP leader Rifa'at Eid: "we are a minority; we need weapons before we need food."[164]

By exploiting the insecurity of Tripoli Alawites, the Asad regime created a useful instrument to manipulate its Lebanese political interests. A good example of this occurred in August 1983 when the United States was applying stern pressure on Damascus to remove its troops from Lebanon. Syrian troops stationed in Tripoli "abruptly withdrew to the city's outskirts" upon which, a devastating bombing of a Sunni Mosque occurred and intensive Sunni–Alawite fighting broke out.[165] The intended message was that Syrian forces were essential to Lebanese stability. A parallel can be drawn with the fighting in 2008, when Bashar al-Asad also sought to prove Syria was instrumental in Lebanese stability. It could be argued that the Asad dynasty's interests were served by the promotion of violence in Tripoli. First, it consolidated Alawite 'asabiyya by promoting sectarian insecurity, but also, it provided them with an argument that Lebanese stability could only be achieved through Syrian intervention.

There are however genuine security concerns for Tripoli Alawites from an upsurge in fundamentalist ideology among Sunnis.[166] A lack of job opportunities

---

[161] Riad Yazbeck 'Return of the Pink Panthers,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 3 No.2, August 2008.

[162] The son of the murdered Rafiq al-Hariri.

[163] Sa'ad Hariri told Alawite leaders in Tripoli: "We are both Lebanese and we will not let anyone tamper with us." *Naharnet*, Beirut, September 7, 2008.

[164] Nicholas Blandford, 'Lebanese Sects aim to end clashes,' *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 September, 2008.

[165] 'Lebanon Car Bomb Kills 19 at Mosque,' *New York Times*, August 6, 1983.

[166] Rami G. Khoury, 'Tripoli distils Mideastern complexities,'*Daily Star*, Beirut, August 18, 2008.

for Tripoli's youth provides fertile ground for recruitment by Salafist clerics. Tripoli journalist, Fakher al-Ayoubi commented in 2008, "A lot of young people are joining the Salafists since May, some of them don't even know how to pray, but they like the idea of fighting the Alawites."[167]

On September 8, 2008 the respective leaders of the Alawite and Sunni communities in Tripoli signed an accord ending the fighting.[168] This agreement was achieved against the backdrop of Syrian troop deployments around the northern Syria-Lebanon border, and even included reports of incursions by Syrian Special Forces into Lebanon.[169] Thus, despite claims by Rifa'at Eid that the Syrian regime was not involved in the Tripoli conflict,[170] the favourable terms of the Tripoli Accord for Alawites, combined with the heavy presence of Syrian troops near Tripoli, indicated strong Syrian support to the Tripoli Alawites.[171]

In terms of Alawite-Asad 'asabiyya it seems that the Alawites of Lebanon looked to the Asad dynasty to provide for their security. It could be read that Rifa'at Eid was referring to the Syrian regime when he stated, "only the capable state that has a strong army and active institutions can protect the Alawites and minorities."[172] This was despite the Lebanese 'Cedar Revolution' in 2005 that appeared to transcend sectarian divisions in a way that could prove beneficial to long term Alawite political interests. Ultimately however, the lack of institutional stability in Lebanon (partially caused by the activities of the Syrian regime), and the perceived threat of Sunni hostility causes Lebanese Alawites to gravitate towards their co-sectarians in Syria. Overall, Sunni-Alawite conflict in Lebanon

---

[167] Robert Worth, 'Up North, Hothouse of Tension in Lebanon,' *New York Times*, October 15, 2008.

[168] 'Accord signed to end north Lebanon bloodshed,' *AFP*, France, September 8, 2008, http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jnKXdReKZOXG75K7qn84NYVLp7UA.

[169] 'Lebanon fears an invasion as Syrian troops mass,' *The Australian*, Sydney, September 25, 2008.

[170] *Naharnet*, Beirut, September 9, 2008.

[171] Michael Young, 'Syria pushes the envelope in the north,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, September 25, 2008.

[172] Interview with Kuwaiti Newspaper, Al-Rai, cited in *Naharnet*, Beirut, 9 September 2008.

serves as a reminder of the potential for a renewal of similar conflict in Syria and helps keep Syrian Alawites firmly behind the 'bulwark' of the Asad regime. [173]

The tiny Alawite village of Ghajar in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights provides an interesting contrast to the Lebanese Alawites' reliance on the Asad dynasty. According to local residents, the village of Ghajar with a population in 2010 of approximately 2200 was established during the Ottoman conquest of the Levant in 1516.[174] This Alawite village was separated from Syria by the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in 1967. Because this community was beyond the reach of Damascus at the outset of Hafiz al-Asad's rule, it is an interesting case of Alawites outside the Alawite-Asad 'asabiyya who pursue their interests independently. The Ghajar Alawites willingly accepted Israeli citizenship in 1981 and, according to some sources, even *requested* Israeli annexation of their village.[175] Conversely most of the Golan Druze community refused to accept Israeli citizenship. [176] Many of the Ghajar residents commute from the village for employment in the industrial zones of northern Israel, in the orchards of the Golan, or in hospitality in Haifa, Tel Aviv or Jerusalem.[177]

In 2009 moves to incorporate Ghajar village into Lebanon produced a strong reaction from the village leaders who strongly lobbied the Israeli government to reconsider.[178] The Ghajar Alawites appeared apprehensive about

---

[173] Tripoli has also been an arena for inter-Alawite rivalry. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Rifa'at al-Asad played a major role as patron of the ADP and its militia, the Arab Red Knights (ARK) or 'Pink Panthers.' After his fall from grace in Damascus and departure into exile in 1984 Rifa'at maintained a presence in Jabal Mohsen. The kidnapping and possible transfer to Syria of an affiliate of Rifa'at al-Asad, Nawar 'Abboud, in Tripoli on December 25, 2008, showed that Rifa'at al-Asad continues to maintain a presence in Tripoli, see: 'Lebanon: Investigate Syrian Opposition Figure's Fate,' *Human Rights Watch*, March 25, 2009.

[174] Asher Kaufman, 'Let Sleeping Dogs Lie,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 63. No. 4, (Autumn 2009), p. 541.

[175] Ibid., p. 556; *Jerusalem Post*, July 19, 2009.

[176] Andrew Tabler, 'Solomon's Baby in the Middle East,' *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/02/solomons_baby_in_the_middle_east.

[177] 'An entity of problematic identity, Al-Ghajar: Three states in dispute over one village,' *Monday Morning Magazine*, Beirut, Issue No.1968, September 13, 2010.

[178] Ghajar Residents Refuse to Become Part of Lebanon, *Naharnet*, Beirut, July 22, 2009, http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/0/5B388C171F3FFFC1C22575FB002CFA02?OpenDocumen; see also: 'Ghajar leaders: Divide would kill us,' *Jerusalem Post*, July 22, 2009.

Islamist Hizballah forces that control southern Lebanon. It appears they have little faith the Asad regime could protect their security against a militant Muslim authority who may judge them collaborators with Israel. Therefore the Ghajar Alawites, for the time being, prefer the security and opportunities afforded by Israeli citizenship. Their official argument for wanting to remain in the Israeli controlled Golan is that they hope to be returned to Syria along with the rest of the Golan. However, if the Ghajar Alawites did not adopt this position they could expect retaliation from the Syrian regime in the event that the Golan was returned to Syria.[179] This type of pragmatic manoeuvring between competing forces seeking the best outcome for Alawite security is reminiscent of pre-Asad dynasty Alawite approaches. In Syria however, the bulk of the Alawite community, increasingly neglected by the new generation of the Asad dynasty and suffering the negative effects of drought, were limited in their room for pragmatic manoeuvre. Their fates were seemingly tied to the Asad dynasty, which in the period 2007 to 2010 would reach a turning point towards its rapid decline.

Overview

In summary, it appeared Alawite approval of the second generation of the Asad dynasty did wane from the broad support enjoyed by Hafiz al-Asad. Several factors contributed to this. First, political reforms pursued early in Bashar’s rule, threatened Alawites by opening opportunities for the Sunni majority to re-establish a political footing in the country. Another factor in decreasing Alawite approval of the Asad dynasty was the introduction of economic reforms that departed from socialist policy, greatly enriched individuals close to the regime, but neglected the interests of ordinary Alawites. A perception also emerged that Bashar abandoned his Alawite roots, which was, seemingly, proven by his marriage to a Sunni Muslim. Emerging cracks in Alawite ‘asabiyya led to the removal of important Alawite figures, such as Ghazi Kana’an. This served to

[179] Andrew Tabler, *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2010.

damage Bashar al-Asad's popularity amongst the Alawite tribes who had enjoyed patronage and protection of such figures. A final influence on Alawite support for Bashar al-Asad was his foreign policy miscalculations, which brought the wrath of international community down upon the regime. All these factors threatened to splinter Alawite support and solidarity. Yet despite emerging Alawite disillusionment with Asad rule, there was little evidence to suggest that ordinary Alawites were prepared to abandon the Asad dynasty.

Chapter Seven

The Rumblings of Revolution and the Resilience of Sectarian ʻAsabiyya

The first seven years of Bashar al-Asad's presidency saw increasing Alawite discontentment about the nature and direction of his rule. Most Alawites gained little material benefit from the new generation of the Asad dynasty, furthermore, the regime had allowed a potentially dangerous resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism, favoured external allies over Alawites and incurred the wrath of the international community. Despite this downward pressure on Alawite ʻasabiyya, sectarian insecurity prevented any serious decline of Alawite support to the Asad dynasty. This represents a departure from Khaldunian theory and demonstrates the resilience of sectarian ʻasabiyya.

What would be the outcome of persistent Alawite support to the Asad dynasty? The resilient nature of sectarian ʻasabiyya could mean that if the Asads fell, so too would the Alawites. A critical factor in Alawite politics was, therefore, whether the Asad family could maintain their grip on power in Syria. Similar to Ibn Khaldun's idea about the lesser ability of rulers born to power and privilege, major elements to consider are Bashar al-Asad's disconnection from the problems of ordinary Syrians, overconfidence in his popularity, his capacity to maintain regime unity and his preoccupation with external threats.[1] All the while, socio-economic and political pressures were reaching a critical level in Syria. Abd al-Halim Khaddam told this writer in 2009: "The real threat to Bashar al-Asad is Bashar al-Asad himself. The way he is. That's the threat that every dictator at the end comes to – that threat of himself."[2] Any 'threat' to the Syrian president,

---

[1] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 149.
[2] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, September 16, 2009, Paris.

whether from his own actions or otherwise, extended to the Alawites, whose sectarian insecurity had led them to believe that their fates were bound to that of the Asad dynasty.

The Regime's Preoccupation with External Threats

In early 2007 the Syrian regime's position at the international level remained precarious. The United States, European governments and the UN continued to apply economic, political and legal pressure on the Syrian regime for its destabilizing roles in Lebanon and Iraq. Bashar al-Asad was almost entirely isolated among Arab states with Hizballah his only major Arab ally and the STL was formally established at the Hague in the Netherlands. In addition, in September 2007, the regime sustained a humiliating blow when the Israeli air force effortlessly breached Syrian defences to destroy a suspected nuclear facility in North East Syria.

Most of all, since the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri, the Asad dynasty was consumed with escaping the threat of the UN investigation and International justice. This was indicated by Jordan's King Abdullah II who, after talks with Bashar al-Asad in April 2008, claimed the issue most concerning the Syrian President was the progress of the UN investigation, and whether or not immunity for heads of state would be available.[3] There were two main reactions by the Syrian regime to the UN investigation. One was to threaten to drag the region into chaos and the other was the manipulation of Western diplomacy to try and ease the regime's international isolation.

Bashar al-Asad pledged not to cooperate with the UN investigation, now led by the Belgian prosecutor Serge Brammertz, if it "compromised" Syrian sovereignty.[4] Instead, the Asad dynasty instigated chaos in Lebanon as a means of derailing the investigation process. On May 20, 2007 at Nahr al-Bared Palestinian

---

[3] 'No immunity for Assad over Hariri murder,' *Ya Libnan*, Beirut, April10, 2008, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/04/no_immunity_for.php.

[4] Ian Black, 'US reassures Lebanon as it woos Syria,' *Guardian*, London, 16 May 2007.

refugee camp, near Tripoli, fighting erupted between al-Qaeda linked militants named Fatah al-Islam, and the Lebanese Army.[5] Evidence suggests that Syrian intelligence, directed by Asef Shawkat, orchestrated the fighting.[6] A Lebanese citizen, Ahmed Merie, testified that he was a liaison between Shawkat and Shaker al-Abssi, the leader of the Fatah al-Islam fighters at Nahr al-Bared.[7] Another report suggested that Asef Shawkat personally travelled to Libya in July 2007, to ask for funds from Colonel Qaddafi because the expense of maintaining the fighting at Nahr al-Bared was straining Syrian financial capacity.[8]

Although it cannot be categorically proven that the Asad dynasty was responsible for the fighting at Nahr al-Bared, the tactic of inciting instability in Northern Lebanon was one that the regime had employed previously. The goal, in this latest case, could have been to demonstrate the consequences of continuing with the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). The content of a meeting between Bashar al-Asad and UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, in Damascus on April 24, 2007, one month prior to the start of fighting in Lebanon supports this conclusion. In response to remarks by the UN Secretary-General about Syria's role in Lebanon, President Asad said:

---

[5] *Reuters*, May, 20 2007, http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L20130134.htm.

[6] 'Syria distances itself from Islamists in Lebanon,' *Khaleej Times*, May 22, 2007; 'Syria says UN Hariri tribunal may destabilize Lebanon,' *Xinhua*, May 31, 2007, http://english.people.com.cn/200705/31/eng20070531_379577.html; 'Free Shiite movement accuses Syria of north Lebanon violence,' *Ya Libnan*, May 20, 2007, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/05/free_shiite_mov_3.php; 'Syria admits Lebanon turmoil is linked to UN vote on Tribunal,' *Ya Libnan*, May 22, 2007, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/05/syria_admits_le_1.php; 'Jumblatt: Lebanon's Fatah al Islam was made in Syria,' *Ya Libnan*, May 28, 2007, 'http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/05/jumblatt_lebano_4.php ; Scott MacLeod, 'Lebanon's PM: Syria Is Threatening My Country,' *Time*, May 31, 2007; 'Eid discovered the link between Fatah al Islam & Syria,' *Ya Libnan*, Beirut, 26 January, 2008, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/01/eid_discovered.php ; Olivier Guitta, 'Planning an Invasion of Lebanon?' *Middle East Times*, Cairo, November 11, 2008.

[7] 'Report: Fatah al-Islam linked to Bashar Assad's Brother-in-Law,' *Naharnet*, Beirut, July 18, 2007, http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/0/1928E602F2D4AEE4C225731C004D856F?OpenDocument.

[8] Abu Kais, 'Is the 'opposition' running out of cash?' *Agravox*, France, July 11, 2007, 'http://www.agoravox.com/article.php3?id_article=6425.

> [...] Lebanese society is very fragile and it has been at its most peaceful when Syrian forces were present in the country [...] now there was great instability in the country. Moreover this instability would intensify if the Special Tribunal were established. This was particularly the case if the Tribunal were established under Chapter 7 of the [UN] Charter.[9] This could easily ignite a conflict which would result in civil war and provoke divisions between Sunni and Shi'a from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea.[10]

Bashar al-Asad was therefore equating continued sectarian stability with the survival of his regime. Bashar had already convinced many Alawites of this logic, which was reflected in the comments of the Alawite Shaykh 'Ali Yeral to this writer in 2011, when he also predicted a far reaching Sunni-Shia conflict if Asad rule was extinguished.[11] Despite Bashar al-Asad's threat about possible repercussions for regional stability, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon was established under Chapter 7 on May 30, 2007,[12] ten days after the outbreak of fighting at Nahr al-Bared camp on the Lebanese Mediterranean coast. The fighting at Nahr al-Bared, which seemed like a realisation of Bashar al-Asad's 'prophecy' to Ban Ki-Moon, lasted for three months, only ceasing after a mass assault by Lebanese troops on September 2, 2007.[13]

The Asad dynasty's concern about the activation of Chapter 7 of the UN Charter was due to the fact that external intervention seemed the only real threat to its position in Syria. The regime was confident internal opposition was under

---

[9] Chapter 7, article 42, of the UN Charter states: "Should the Security Council consider that [non violent] measures provided for in Article 41 would be inadequate or have proved to be inadequate, it may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security," available at: http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter7.shtml (accessed August 10, 2008).

[10] United Nations, Note of the Secretary-General's meeting with His Excellency President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, Held at the Palace in Damascus on 24 April, 2007.

[11] Shaykh 'Ali Yeral, interview with the author, March 28, 2011, Antakya, Turkey.

[12] UN Security Council, S/RES/1757 (2007), 07-36357 (E), adopted, May 30, 2007.

[13] 'Syria Rushes to Applaud Army Seizure of Nahr al-Bared,' *Naharnet*, Beirut, September 2, 2007, http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/newsdesk.nsf/0/0A946680A859277DC225734A0069C8BC?OpenDocument.

control thanks to the efforts of Alawites in the security and military establishment. The first step that Bashar al-Asad took after the May 30 UN decision was not, however, to turn to his Alawite community but his Iranian allies. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, arrived in Damascus on June 1, 2007 to discuss options and agreed to "cooperate on achieving unity and stability in Lebanon,"[14] which, in other words, meant actively subverting their enemies in Lebanon. Iran and Syria's methods of achieving this goal involved paralysing the Lebanese political system.

Lebanese presidential elections slated for September 2007 were postponed due to ongoing political assassinations and a boycott by pro-Syrian Lebanese MPs.[15] The elections were postponed a staggering twenty times before an agreement was finally signed at Doha on May 21, 2008.[16] The Doha accord gave major concessions to Syria's Lebanese political allies, including the right to veto government decisions.[17] Thus, the Asad dynasty and the Iranian regime, less than a year after their crisis meeting on June 1, 2007, re-established a strong political footing in Lebanon.

The other main strategy the Syrian regime pursued to alleviate external threats to its position was the manipulation of Western diplomacy. Despite the consolidation of Iranian-Syrian ties in 2007, Syria gave signals that it was open to a strategic realignment away from Iran in return for concessions from Western and Arab powers. While the US and French administrations remained unconvinced of

---

[14] 'Lebanon tribunal high on agenda of Iran FM & Syria's Assad,' *Ya Libnan*, Beirut, 1 June, 2007, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/06/lebanon_tribuna_2.php.

[15] 'Lebanese presidential election postponed,' *Radio Netherlands*, September 25, 2007, http://static.rnw.nl/migratie/www.radionetherlands.nl/currentaffairs/lbn070925-redirected. The latest victim was anti-Syrian Member of Parliament, Antoine Ghanem, on September 19, 2007, a few days before the elections were slated, *Daily Star*, Beirut, September 20, 2007.

[16] 'Meet Michel Suleiman, Lebanon's next president,' *Ya Libnan*, Beirut, May 21, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/05/meet_michel_sul.php.

[17] Rodger Shanahan, *Hizbullah: Walking the Lebanese Tightrope*, (Sydney: Lowy Institute For International Policy, July 2008).

Syrian intentions,[18] the prospect of a Syrian strategic realignment appealed to Israeli decision makers who were feeling vulnerable after their unconvincing performance in the 2006 Lebanon war.[19] For Syria a renewed peace process with Israel could provide an opening for the Asad dynasty to split the international consensus about holding the Syrian regime accountable for the political assassinations in Lebanon. Owing to US reluctance to be drawn into the process, Syria and Israel instead began negotiating possible indirect talks via Turkish mediation in June 2007.[20]

The election of a new president in France in May 2007 presented another opportunity, under the aegis of its Iranian allies, for the Syrian regime to emerge further from crisis.[21] According to *Al-Hayat* newspaper, shortly after his inauguration, President Sarkozy received a letter from Tehran offering France the opportunity to regain some of its lost influence in the Levant by playing an important role in regional peace initiatives.[22] Tehran perhaps recognising the ambition of the new, right wing, French President and the persistent desire of France for a role in the Eastern Mediterranean, sought to further break up the international coalition against their Syrian allies.

It was not France, however, that first broke the Western diplomatic embargo on Syria. In early June 2007, the Italian foreign minister, Massimo

---

[18] Glenn Kessler, 'Rice Cautions Israel on Syria,' *Washington Post*, May 30, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/29/AR2007052901808.html ; 'New French FM says Paris will continue to snub Syria,' *Ha'aretz,* Israel, May 25, 2007.

[19] Adam Entous, 'Israeli officials: Syria seems serious about talks,' *Reuters*, May 26, 2007, http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L26375948.htm; Steven Erlanger, 'For Israel, reasons to talk to Syria are adding up,' *New York Times*, May 27, 2007; 'Senior IDF officials urge Olmert to talk to Assad,' *Ynet*, June 3, 2007, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3407830,00.html.

[20] 'Reports: Olmert sent peace messages to Syria via Turkey,' *Today's Zaman*, Istanbul, June 9, 2007, http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=113569; 'Turkish official denies mediation in Israel-Syria secret talks,' *Today's Zaman*, Istanbul, June 14, 2007, http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=114007; 'Assad: Israel and Syria in touch via third country,' *Ha'aretz,* Israel, July 19, 2007.

[21] 'White House Hails Sarkozy's election in France,' *MSNBC*, May 7, 2007, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18535501/ns/politics/.

[22] Cited in 'US Iran talks: Is Iran trying to inherit Syria in Lebanon ?' *Ya Libnan*, May 28, 2007, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/05/us_iran_talks_i_1.php.

D'Alema, travelled to Damascus to discuss events in Lebanon and the prospect of an international tribunal to try suspects indicted by UNIIIC.[23] Even though the talks reportedly did not proceed well and broke down over Italian demands for Syria to stop interfering in Lebanon,[24] the main outcome of the talks was an invaluable boost for the Asad dynasty from the re-opening of diplomatic dialogue.

In early July 2007 there were indications of a change in approach by the French government from its previous hard-line stance against Syria and its allies.[25] By the end of July France had sent an envoy to both Damascus and Tehran, carrying a message: "Such visits will not take place in the future unless France sees tangible changes in Syria's behaviour in Lebanon and the region."[26] Yet the diplomatic procession continued with Spanish envoys arriving in Damascus in August 2007.[27] In this fashion, the Asad dynasty gradually emerged from its isolation of 2005-2006.

On September 6, 2007, however, the Asad regime suffered another setback. Eight unopposed Israeli aircraft bombed a military installation in North East Syria, which the Israelis believed to contain a nuclear facility.[28] This graphically demonstrated regime weakness in the face of Israeli aggression. Bashar al-Asad's domestic legitimacy was strongly hinged upon 'steadfast resistance' against the Israeli enemy; hence opposition figures used the opportunity to highlight the regime's weakness. Abd al-Halim Khaddam stated shortly after the attack: "The Syrian regime cannot respond to what Israel did and is incapable of defending

---

[23] 'Italian FM to visit Syria Monday on Lebanon issue,' *Xinhua*, China, June 04, 2007, http://english.people.com.cn/200706/04/eng20070604_380537.html; 'Syria differentiates between Hariri probe and tribunal,' *Xinhua*, June 6, 2007, http://english.people.com.cn/200706/06/eng20070606_381283.html.

[24] 'Syria ordered its Lebanon cells to kill 4 prominent Lebanese,' *Ya Libnan*, Beirut, 11 June, 2007, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/06/syria_orders_it.php.

[25] 'An end to Chirac's pro-Christian policy?' *Ha'aretz*, Tel Aviv, July 15, 2007.

[26] 'France tells Syria, Iran : Quit betting on deal over Lebanon,' *Ya Libnan*, Beirut, July 21, 2007, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/07/france_tells_sy_1.php.

[27] 'Spanish FM has 'positive message' from Syria for Olmert,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, August 06, 2007.

[28] 'Washington declines comment after Syria fires on Israeli planes,' *AFP*, Washington, Sep 6, 2007, http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5iQTC3YIzqSjOB0dNDb2cLZeygMuw.

Syria. [Bashar al-Asad] is incapable of anything except oppressing the Syrian people."[29]

The Israeli aggression came as a shock to the Asad dynasty because the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, had seemingly been responding positively to Syrian overtures for peace talks through Turkish channels.[30] Within days of the attack the regime mobilised part of its large army reserve in preparation to defend against further Israeli incursions.[31] In reality Syria was virtually helpless against conventional Israeli attacks. The attack highlighted the fact that the Asad dynasty had become focused on providing for Hizballah and Iranian interests, to the detriment of Syria's military capability. Observation by this author in 2009-2011 supported this appraisal. Military hardware visible around Syria was generally dilapidated and often appeared at least twenty or thirty years old. This is in contrast to the impressive arsenal of Hizballah in Southern Lebanon.[32]

The neglect of Syria's armed forces was a source of Alawite dissatisfaction about Bashar al-Asad's rule. Although Hafiz al-Asad had all but bankrupted the Syrian economy trying to modernise the Syrian military in the 1980s,[33] for Alawites this was recognition of their valuable role as the protectors of their community and Syria. By late 2007 it seemed that the Asad dynasty allocated resources along two lines: enriching the inner core of the dynasty and supplying its Hizballah ally in Lebanon. By prioritising external allies over its own community, the regime risked alienating senior Alawites in the security forces. In general, Alawite confidence in Bashar al-Asad to protect their interests was sorely tested by the Asad regime's weakness in the face of Israeli aggression.

[29] 'Former Syrian VP: 'Assad is a joke,' *Jerusalem Post*, 'September 20, 2007, http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1189411453349&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull.

[30] 'Spanish FM has 'positive message' from Syria for Olmert,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, August 6, 2007.

[31] 'Report: Syria calling reserve forces following Israeli flyover,' *Al-Bawaba*, Amman, September 9, 2007, http://www.albawaba.com/en/countries/Syria/216657.

[32] See for example: 'U.N. told Hizballah arsenal has tripled,' *UPI*, Washington, October 31, 2007, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2007/10/31/UN-told-Hezbollah-arsenal-has-tripled/UPI-65711193833539/.

[33] Hazem Khandil, 'The Challenge of Restructuring: Syrian Foreign Policy,' in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, eds., B. Korany & A.E.H. Dessoukip, (Cairo: AUC Press, 2009), p. 428.

In this context, Syrian opposition claims that in late October 2007 Alawites demonstrated in Latakia about Bashar al-Asad's performance, seem credible. According to the report, some protesters even waved placards of Rifa'at al-Asad.[34] Despite his poor reputation and radical approaches, Rifa'at was perhaps recalled as a stronger protector of Alawite interests than Bashar al-Asad. He had, after all, defeated the challenge of the Muslim Brothers. Ironically, in Latakia in 1979 when Alawites had previously expressed frustration at the Asad regime's performance, it was Rifa'at al-Asad who was sent to repress Alawite dissent. In 2007, Asef Shawkat was charged with cracking down on the protesters many of whom were arrested.[35]

Despite these signs of disquiet within the Alawite community, Bashar al-Asad's main focus remained the STL.[36] In March 2008 the STL was formalised, with a venue at the Hague in the Netherlands, along with the appointment of judges, a registrar and a prosecutor.[37] In April 2008, one of the STL's key witnesses, Muhammad Zuhayr as-Siddiq, disappeared from Paris, and the Beirut home of Judge Ralph Riachi, who was assigned to the Tribunal, was ransacked twice.[38] Another early informant to the UNIIIC investigation, Ziad Wasef Ramadan, was imprisoned in Syria and has not been heard from since September 2007.[39] Whether or not the Syrian regime was involved in all these events is uncertain, however, the possibility cannot be discounted.

---

[34] Ammar Abd al-Hamid, November 3, 2007, http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/amarji/2007/11/index.html; see also 'Rifaat Al-Assad Posters in Syria October-2007,' '*You Tube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_yyPooueMg&feature=player_embedded.

[35] Ibid.

[36] 'UN officials: Syria still suspect in Hariri murder,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, March 31, 2008.

[37] 'International tribunal for Lebanon killings reaches start-up phase – UN report,' *UN News Centre*, March 18, 2008, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=26021&Cr=leban&Cr1=tribunal.

[38] 'Intruders strike home of judge tied to Hariri court – again,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, April 23, 2008.

[39] 'Syria: Reveal Fate of Hariri-Case Detainee,' *Human Rights Watch*, June 23, 2009; 'Hariri witness held for four years without charge in Syria,' *Amnesty International*, July 20, 2009, http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/hariri-witness-held-four-years-without-charge-syria-20090720.

The unfolding international legal proceedings against the Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir, by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2008, added to the Syrian president's apprehension about the STL. The eventual indictment of Al-Bashir in March 2009 set a precedent that sitting presidents were, in fact, not immune from international proceedings.[40] The Syrian Foreign Ministry quickly issued a statement that revealed Bashar al-Asad's anxiety about this development:

> Syria views with concern [...] the arrest warrant issued for Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir, and that the decision to issue it is a grave precedent that disregards the immunity of all heads of state under the Vienna Convention [...] harmed Sudanese sovereignty, and constituted disgraceful interference in its internal affairs.[41]

To evade the perceived threat of the STL the Asad dynasty activated its two key strategic assets: its roles in the Arab-Israeli peace process and Lebanese domestic politics. Indirect Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations were officially announced under Turkish mediation on May 21, 2008.[42] Parallel to this announcement (on the same day in fact) the Doha accords, mentioned earlier, were signed under Syrian auspices. This agreement finally unlocked Lebanon's political paralysis but left Hizballah greatly enhanced in Lebanese politics.[43]

At the international level these moves by Damascus proved a diplomatic master stroke; they had an immediate effect on liberal politicians in the US who believed it proved the constructive ability and good intentions of the Syrian

---

[40] See: 'A Middle Way for Justice in Sudan,' *The Economist*, December 11, 2008.

[41] *Al-Thawra*, Damascus, March 6, 2009, translated by Memri, available at http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/14406.htm.

[42] 'Israel, Syria acknowledge indirect talks in Turkey,' *CNN*, May 21, 2008, http://articles.cnn.com/2008-05-21/world/israel.syria_1_indirect-talks-peace-deal-golan-heights?_s=PM:WORLD.

[43] 'Deal for Lebanese Factions Leaves Hezbollah Stronger,' *New York Times*, May 22, 2008.

regime.[44] This was very encouraging for the Syrian regime, considering the forthcoming elections in the United States and the likelihood of a Democrat Party victory. Suddenly presidential candidate Barack Obama became a popular figure in Damascus.[45]

Signs emerged that the vigour of the international effort to pursue justice was slowing. In January 2008 the original UNIIIC head investigator, Detlev Mehlis, criticized the lack of progress of the investigation under Serge Brammertz.[46] And in May 2009 Judge Mehlis told this writer he did "not see any murder indictments [against the Syrian regime] in the foreseeable future."[47] By November 2010 the Syrian regime appeared to have escaped any immediate indictments from the STL, which seemed to have narrowed its focus to suspects from Hizballah.[48]

Another positive development at the international level for the Asad dynasty was Bashar al-Asad's invitation to the Mediterranean Union summit, hosted by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, in Paris on July 13, 2008.[49] This was the Syrian President's first visit to a western country since the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. Bashar al-Asad must have impressed Nicolas Sarkozy, because he was invited to stay on in Paris as a special guest at Bastille Day celebrations on July 14.[50] This event was identified by many observers as the major symbol of Bashar al-Asad's international rehabilitation and the end of Syria's

---

[44] John Kerry & Chuck Hagel, 'It's Time to Talk to Syria,' *Wall St, Journal*, New York, June 5, 2008.

[45] Judith Miller, 'Obamamania in Damascus,' *City Journal*, New York, vol. 19, no.14, June 3, 2008.

[46] 'Mehlis: Hariri Murder Probe 'Appears to Have Lost Momentum',' *Naharnet*, Beirut, January 28, 2008, http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/0/1F59882360B36387C22573DE00356E57?OpenDocument.

[47] Detlev Mehlis, interview with this author, May, 12, 2009, Dunedin.

[48] Neil MacDonald, 'CBC Investigation: Who killed Lebanon's Rafik Hariri?' *CBC News*, Canada, November 21, 2010; see also: 'Indictment and its confirmation made public,' *Special Tribunal for Lebanon*, Leidschendam, August 17, 2011, available at: http://www.stl-tsl.org/en/media/press-releases/17-08-2011-indictment-and-its-confirmation-decision-made-public.

[49] 'Mediterranean Union launch summit in Paris,' *Reuters*, July 13, 2008, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2008/07/13/uk-france-mediterranean-idUKL1323466820080713.

[50] 'Boycott lifted as France hosts Syria's president,' *The Guardian*, UK, July 12, 2008.

isolation.[51] These 'victories' at the international level were significant in terms of the recovery of the Asad dynasty from crisis, however, they also served to gloss over rising domestic challenges, both among the Syrian regime elite and to a deeper extent in Syrian society.

Cracks in the 'Asabiyya of the Asad Dynasty Elite

The ability of Bashar al-Asad to maintain the cohesion of Alawite 'asabiyya was severely tested in the first half of 2008. Following the Alawite demonstrations in Latakia in October 2007, dissension near the top of the Asad dynasty surfaced in 2008 through a series of assassinations and extraordinary events within Syria. Ordinary Alawite 'asabiyya was dependent on the ability of the regime to preserve community security. According to Abd al-Halim Khaddam the internal fighting within the regime was about "personal interests and cuts of money."[52]

The pressure of trying to escape external threats placed great strain on the unity of the regime. Similar to the part played by Rifa'at al-Asad in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bashar al-Asad's brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat, became increasingly influential in the 2000s. Reflective of Ibn Khaldun's idea that "control over the ruler (by others) may occur in dynasties,"[53] Shawkat's influence can be detected in many of Bashar's major decisions. These included regime reactions to the US invasion of Iraq, the 'likely' murder of Rafiq al-Hariri, and strategies employed to extricate the regime from isolation. According to Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Asef Shawkat is a very ambitious individual.[54] Also, his performance suggests he is ruthless and prepared to take radical steps to ensure his objectives,

---

[51] For example see: 'Political master strokes,' *Oxford Analytica*, UK, July 31, 2008, available at, http://www.oxan.com/worldnextweek/2008-07-31/PoliticalMasterstroke.aspx.

[52] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with Lee Smith, 'Damascus's Deadly Bargain,' *New Republic*, November 14, 2008.

[53] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 149.

[54] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author.

including exploiting Bashar al-Asad's "unstable moods."[55] An anonymous Lebanese official, for example, claimed Shawkat wanted to provoke Israel into a war with Syria and Hizballah in September 2007.[56]

Coming from a "weak family," Asef Shawkat has no real power base within the Alawite community.[57] His influence stems primarily from his close association with the Asad family. On the other hand, Bashar al-Asad was indebted to his brother-in-law for the crucial support Shawkat provided at the outset of his rule and moreover, was obliged to favour him out of loyalty to his sister, Bushra. Yet in 2008 Shawkat's profound influence on Syrian politics was to take a turn.

In January 2008, the sequence of assassinations and destabilisation in Lebanon continued. On January 16, a US embassy vehicle was targeted in a bombing,[58] and on January 26, Wissam Eid, a Lebanese intelligence officer who made a breakthrough in the Hariri investigation,[59] was assassinated.[60] At this point, however, the violence shifted to Damascus. On February 12, 2008 a car bomb in Damascus killed Imad Mughniyeh, a top ranking Hizballah operative.[61] The initial reaction of Hizballah was outrage against Israel. Hasan Nasrallah vented: "You killed him outside our natural battleground. Our battleground with you is on Lebanese territory and you have overstepped the border."[62] If Israel was indeed responsible, the assassination would constitute a serious lapse in Syria's

---

[55] This appraisal was supported by Judge Mehlis based on his 2005 investigations, interview the author. In addition, a senior Syrian official who relocated to the UAE also promoted this view, see *Ynet*, Israel, August 14, 2007, 'Arab official: Syrian general mulling war with Israel,' http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3437324,00.html.

[56] 'Arab official: Syrian general mulling war with Israel,' *Ynet*, Israel, August 14, 2007, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3437324,00.html.

[57] Michael Slackman, 'Fearing an Iraq in a Post-Assad Syria,' *New York Times*, November, 6, 2005.

[58] 'Three killed by bomb meant for US Embassy vehicle,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, January 16, 2008.

[59] Neil Macdonald, 'Who Killed Lebanon's Rafik Hariri?' *CBC News*, November 21, 2010.

[60] 'Eid discovered the link between Fatah al Islam & Syria,' *Ya Libnan*, Beirut, January 26, 2008, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/01/eid_discovered.php

[61] 'Imad Mughniyeh assassinated in Damascus,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, February 14, 2008.

[62] 'Hezbollah declares 'open war' on Israel,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 15, 2008.

supposedly sound internal security. Israel denied responsibility for the operation however, and alternative theories must be considered.[63]

The exact details behind Mughniyeh's murder are uncertain, however, it is possible that certain, dissatisfied, members of the Alawite elite, who had been steadily sidelined in favour of Iranian and Hizballah interests, sought to adjust the status quo in Damascus. In this context, it is possible that Asef Shawkat orchestrated the murder. There is some evidence to suggest that, like Rifa'at al-Asad's coup in 1983, Asef Shawkat had decided to depose Bashar al-Asad; however, Imad Mughniyeh discovered his plans.[64] Other reports claimed that Asef Shawkat had already overstepped his bounds by unilaterally meeting with United States envoys in Ankara to discuss the possibility of a deal, whereby Syria would temporarily withdraw support from Hizballah in return for a "freeze" on the establishment of the STL.[65] This could explain the emergence of a serious problem between Shawkat and Mughniyeh.

In any case, Mughniyeh's murder was an embarrassment for Bashar al-Asad,[66] compounded by the fact that the Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki was due in Damascus the following day.[67] Moreover, a delegation of Americans, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, the foreign policy adviser to US presidential candidate, Barack Obama, was in Damascus at the time.[68] Nonetheless, Bashar al-Asad seemed intent on rescuing the good graces of his

[63] *Naharnet*, Beirut, December 6, 2008.

[64] *Die Welt*, Germany, June 7, 2008, cited in Gary C. Gambill, 'The Mysterious Downfall of Assef Shawkat,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.3, No.2, August 2008; see also *Ynet*, Israel, July 6, 2008, 'German report: Assad's brother-in-law attempted coup,' http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3552992,00.htm.

[65] 'Something happening in Damascus?,' *Middle East Times*, Cairo, April 14, 2008.

[66] A European Diplomat in Damascus at the time spoke of the acute embarrassment of the Syrian security establishment, see: 'The secret war continues,' *Ynet*, Israel, October 19, 2009, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3792320,00.html.

[67] 'Iran FM to discuss future of Lebanon with Syria's al-Assad,' *Iran Focus*, Tehran, February 11, 2008, http://www.iranfocus.com/en/special-wire/iran-fm-to-discuss-future-of-lebanon-with-syria-s-al-assad-14136.html.

[68] 'Adviser to Clinton Meets With President of Syria,' *New York Sun*, February 15, 2008, http://www.nysun.com/Foreign/adviser-to-clinton-meets-with-president-of-syria/71359/.

external allies, Hizballah and Iran, at the expense of his close adviser and family member, Asef Shawkat.

Bashar's al-Asad's cousin, Hafiz Makhlouf, handled the investigation into the Mughniyeh killing, while Shawkat was sidelined and, according to some reports, placed under house arrest in April 2008.[69] When released he was placed into a ceremonial role as head of a contrived National Security Council.[70] It is notable that the assassination campaign in Lebanon, which had been fairly constant since 2005, dissipated in the period after Shawkat's supposed demotion.[71] This was not however, the end of Shawkat's career or of internal conflict among the elites of the Asad dynasty.

On the evening of August 1, 2008 the Alawite Brigadier General Muhammad Suleiman was assassinated by a sniper in the coastal town of Tartous. Suleiman was considered to be Bashar al-Asad's top security aide responsible for sensitive "special projects."[72] Abd al-Halim Khaddam told this writer that Muhammad Suleiman was responsible for the suspected nuclear project that the Israelis destroyed in 2007. According to Khaddam, Suleiman was killed by the Syrian regime because of his special knowledge of this project, essentially "he knew too much."[73] The assassination did indeed hinder the progress of an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inquiry into a suspected nuclear programme in Syria,[74] however, whether this was enough cause to warrant killing Bashar al-Asad's closest aide is debatable.

---

[69] Gary C. Gambill, 'The Mysterious Downfall of Assef Shawkat,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.3, No.2, August 2008; *IWPR*, Syria Issue 29, London, October 3, 2008.

[70] Ibid; Abd al-Halim Khaddam affirmed his view to this writer in 2009 that Asef Shawkat was taken out of his position of responsibility in 2008.

[71] The exception is the Druze politician, Saleh Aridi, who was assassinated in September 2008.

[72] US Embassy Cable, SECRET SECTION 01 of 02 DAMASCUS 000541, August 3, 2008, (Wiki leaks).

[73] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author.

[74] "IAEA Chief Muhammad El-Baradei reveals that its probe into possible nuclear activity was delayed because its contact man in Syria was murdered." *AFP*, France, September 26, 2008; See also, *Wall St. Journal*, November 29, 2008.

The possibility must also be considered that Muhammad Suleiman was a casualty of a power struggle that was occurring near the pinnacle of the Asad dynasty.[75] Other significant events when viewed in this context add weight to this appraisal. In September 2008, Hisham al-Labadani, the top aide to Damascus based Palestinian Hamas leader, Khaled Meshal, was reportedly hauled from a car in Homs and executed.[76] Two weeks later on September 27, 2008, a car bomb exploded in Damascus near the Palestinian Branch of Military Intelligence in Sayeda Zeinab neighbourhood. The bombing involved 200 kilograms of explosives and killed seventeen people, including a high ranking officer, Brigadier General Abd al-Karim 'Abas, and his son.[77] Significantly the head of the Palestine Branch of Military Intelligence, Suleiman Dayoub, was a close ally of Asef Shawkat.[78]

The September 27 bombing in Damascus was the final event in the series of assassinations inside Syria, beginning with Imad Mughniyeh in February 2008. From this time the internal disturbances and regime struggles appeared to dissipate. Asef Shawkat's role in the regime became much less conspicuous in the aftermath of the Damascus explosion, indicating that he conceded the supremacy of his brother-in-law, Bashar al-Asad. The fact that Asef Shawkat did not suffer a worse fate than demotion can likely be put down to Bushra al-Asad's influence with Bashar.

Similarly to the 2004 Kurdish riots, Bashar al-Asad used the September 27 explosion - the first such event in Damascus in twenty seven years - to emphasise the need to avoid any political upheaval in Syria. Asad placed blame on his March

---

[75] 'No Consensus on Bombing,' *IWPR*, Damascus, October 4, 2008.

[76] 'Chief Hamas aide assassinated in Syria,' *The Australian*, Sydney, September 17, 2008.

[77] 'Syria hunts for Damascus bombers,' *AFP*, France, September 27, 2008; *MEMRI*, September 30, 2008, http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/10176.htm; 'Syrian car bomb kills 17' *BBC*, London, September 27, 2008; 'Did the Damascus Blast Target Syrian Intelligence Officer Linked to the Hariri Crime?' *Naharnet*, Beirut, September 29, 2008, http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/newsdesk.nsf/0/C59A886E5C185DC5C22574D300609132?OpenDocument; Albert Aji, 'Killer car bomb hits Damascus,' *The Times*, London, September 27, 2008.

[78] 'Top Syrian officer among bomb victims,' *Jerusalem Post*, September 28, 2008.

14 enemies in Lebanon for orchestrating the attack via the Sunni extremist group, Fatah al-Islam.[79] This increased the Syrian regime's justification for intervening in Lebanon's internal affairs to protect Syria's domestic security.[80] Also, by blaming the attack on Muslim extremists emanating from northern Lebanon, another timely reminder was delivered to Alawites about the ever present threat of 'Islamist terrorists' to their security.[81] This of course helped to consolidate Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya.

This type of competition over power and its spoils by the regime elite corresponds to Khaldunian notions of a corrupt and decaying dynasty whose 'asabiyya is in decline. It is important to emphasise the separation between elite Alawites and the rest of the Alawite community. The deterioration of unity among the Asad dynasty elite, contrasts the persistence of overall Alawite 'asabiyya. The former process fits with the Khaldunian framework of decreasing 'asabiyya in dynasties. Conversely, continued sectarian insecurity among ordinary Alawites, a factor that Ibn Khaldun did not consider, meant they maintained their support to the Asad dynasty. A parallel can be made with the way Rifa'at al-Asad turned against his elder brother in 1984 while the bulk of Alawites remained loyal to Hafiz al-Asad. Overall, the feeling of sectarian insecurity among the Alawite community continued to be an important political asset to the Asad dynasty.

The Overconfidence of Bashar al-Asad

Ibn Khaldun suggested that "the second stage is one in which the ruler... is concerned with gaining adherents and acquiring clients and followers in great numbers."[82] In other words ruler's who have inherited power may seek the

---

[79] 'Syrian TV shows men 'confessing' to deadly bomb attack,' *AFP*, Damascus, November 6, 2008, http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gq6arHHkxl-wuzRVxux2KtF6E5qg.

[80] See *SANA*, Damascus, September 29, 2008; *Daily Star*, Beirut, September 30, 2008; *Gulf News*, UAE, October 1, 2008.

[81] Tony Badran, 'Divided They Stand: The Syrian Opposition,' *Mideast Monitor*, , Vol. 1, No.3, September-October 2006.

[82] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 141.

adoration of the masses and be prone to delusions of grandeur. As Bashar al-Asad confronted the numerous challenges facing his rule his self belief steadily increased. This overconfidence however, evolved into a dangerous disconnection from ordinary Syrians, including Alawites, and lack of awareness of the social and political pressures building in Syrian society in the latter part of the decade. The major factors in Bashar al-Asad's developing hubris would be his stance on the 2009 Gaza war and his apparent victories against his various internal and external opponents.

On May 27, 2007, Bashar al-Asad was returned as president in the seven yearly referendum with a 97.29 percent of the vote. Like previous referendums the president was the only candidate.[83] David Lesch, a Middle East scholar who gained personal access to Bashar al-Asad, suggested that Bashar's self belief began to increase after the 2007 presidential referendum. Lesch observed in Bashar al-Asad, "a cathartic expression of gratification that the people really liked him."[84] It should be noted the majority of 'no' voters either resided outside the country or else were quickly apprehended by the Mukhabarat. For example, one person named Mesbah 'ala al-Din from the Latakia region was reportedly arrested after voting 'no' to a second term for Bashar al-Asad and was not heard from again.[85] The easing international pressure in the first half of 2007 and the 'resounding endorsement' of the referendum gave Bashar al-Asad the confidence to begin harshly cracking down on internal dissent.

After the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, a feeling had endured among Syrian political dissidents that the regime could be challenged. According to Syrian human rights lawyer, Anwar al-Bouni, this was only because

---

[83] 'Turnout in Syria vote for Assad "unprecedented"' *Khaleej Times*, UAE, May 28, 2007.

[84] 'Assad no longer stands in his father's shadow,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, June 21, 2009.

[85] 'No Trace Of Syrian Citizen Who Voted Against Assad,' *MEMRI*, August 16, 2007, http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/2515.htm.

of "the fright [the US invasion of Iraq] gave our rulers."[86] By June 2007 however, ten reform activists including Michel Kilo, Kamal Labwani, Mahmoud Issa, Suleiman Shummar, and Khalil Hussain, Muslim brotherhood member Abd al-Jabar Allawi, Ahmed Sheikho, Faisal Ballani, Kurdish Activist Ziad Ismail, and Anwar al-Bouni himself, were imprisoned on political charges.[87]

Then, after a parting shot by George W. Bush when US Special Forces raided Syrian territory in October 2008,[88] the US threat dissipated when Barack Obama was elected US President and signalled a policy of re-engagement with Syria. The threat from the STL, while still present, receded. Moreover, Syrian interests in Lebanon were being re-established, albeit in a diminished capacity in contrast to Hizballah and Iran's expanded influence in Lebanese affairs, and Bashar al-Asad appeared to consolidate control of his regime.

During these diversions domestic socio-economic and political conditions in Syria were largely neglected. The promise of modernizing reform, which Bashar al-Asad had bought to the presidency, seemed a distant memory and was almost completely replaced by the rhetoric of 'resistance.' Bashar al-Asad appeared to believe that steadfast resistance against the 'Khaldunian external enemy,' namely Israel, would be enough to sustain his popularity among the Syrian population. In March 2009, for example, the Syrian Culture Minister, Dr Riyad al-Agha told UAE newspaper *Al-Ittihad*, "I believe that resistance is [the

---

[86] 'Barry Rubin: Being nice to Syria will lead nowhere,' *IMRA*, May 23, 2007, http://www.imra.org.il/story.php3?id=34455.

[87] 'Syria court sentences dissidents for 'speaking false news,' *Jurist*, *Legal News & Research*, May 14, 2007, http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/paperchase/2007/05/syria-court-sentences-dissidents-for.php ; 'Syria: Four More Activists Sentenced to Prison,' Human Rights Watch,' *Reuters*, May 16, 2007, http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/HRW/be509caa985cc6ca3257a42790d873c0.htm ; 'Syria jails four more dissidents,' *Middle East Online*, Damascus, June 5, 2007, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=20961.

[88] 'What could lie behind Syria raid?' *BBC*, UK, October 26, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7692263.stm.

only] practical option, despite its heavy toll; indeed, resistance demands from a people, that choose it, numerous losses and sacrifices."[89]

Hafiz al-Asad also utilized the resistance discourse to buttress his rule; however, he had also been careful to maintain a careful balance between the discourses of resistance and reform, the provision of the basic needs of Syrian citizens, and the support of his Alawite community. Hafiz al-Asad crafted his regional strategy with a view to sustaining the Asad dynasty, which included consideration of Alawite concerns. For example, Hafiz never allowed any serious increase in religious fanaticism, even from his allies, Hizballah. Conversely, Bashar al-Asad operated in the regional arena with the prime objectives of escaping from the threat of the STL and boosting his personal popularity, often through religious rhetoric about 'resistance' to Israel and the West.

Bashar al-Asad's ambition to grow his popularity in the Arab-Muslim world beyond his Alawite community was demonstrated in his stances on the Gaza War that began in December 2008.[90] Speaking at the Doha Summit on January 16, 2008, Bashar vented:

> We will take care to remind our children of the Gaza slaughter. We will save the pictures of the children of Gaza with their wounds and blood, and we will teach our children that the strong believer is better than the weak.[91]

This type of religious rhetoric ran counter to Alawite preferences for secular political approaches. Strong religious feelings among the Sunni Muslim majority had always been dangerous for Alawites. However, Bashar al-Asad's

---

[89] 'Syrian Culture Minister Extols Resistance,' *Al-Ittihad*, UAE, March 27, 2009, trans., *Memri*, July 26, 2009, No. 2462, http://www.memri.org/bin/latestnews.cgi?ID=SD246209.

[90] 'Israeli troops mobilize as Gaza assault widens,' *Associated Press*, December 29, 2008; see also: *Associated Press*, January 18, 2009.

[91] 'Syrian president whips up religious fervour,' *Gulf News*, UAE, January 18, 2008; for another example of Bashar al-Asad's rhetoric on Gaza see: 'Syrian president says Gaza attacks "worse than Nazism," *Adnkronos*, Italy, January 16, 2008, http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Security/?id=3.0.2916833303.

personal profile was elevated enormously in the Muslim world and he became almost a cult figure of the 'resistance' in large sections of the Arab 'street.' A pop song was even written about him named "Bashar the Lion,"[92] and ironically, the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo awarded him the title of "the most popular leader" in the Middle East.[93] This newfound popularity came at the expense of Western aligned Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, whose muted responses to the Gaza war placed severe strains on these governments as their populations demanded stronger responses.[94]

Bashar al-Asad also used the Gaza war as an excuse to indefinitely suspend the Turkish sponsored Syrian-Israeli indirect peace talks.[95] The Asad regime arguably only ever engaged in these talks as a means to escape from international isolation by improving its standing with Western countries. The peace talks were clearly disingenuous as Bashar al-Asad's strong alliance with Iran and Hizballah precluded any chance he would unilaterally come to terms with the Israelis.[96] The Gaza War, therefore, provided Bashar al-Asad a convenient opportunity to exit the peace talks without losing face with the Turkish Government, France, Britain, or the incoming United States administration, all of whom had recently offered Syria concessions based on its (potential) 'constructive' regional role.[97]

The Syrian president's other victory stemming from the Gaza war was the temporary truce with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Bashar al-Asad strongly supported the Palestinian Islamists, even while it remained a capital offence to be a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. An Egyptian official raised this

---

[92] 'Syria Profits from Regional Diplomatic Upheaval after Gaza Conflict,' *VOA*, United States, February 2, 2008, http://www.voanews.com/english/2009-02-02-voa39.cfm.

[93] 'Assad no longer stands in his father's shadow,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, June 21, 2009.

[94] Jonathan Spyer, 'Analysis: Israel's reluctant allies,' *Jerusalem Post*, December 30, 2008.

[95] Ibid; 'Israel bombs Gaza in 'all-out war' on Hamas,' *AFP*, December 30, 2008, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iFQrIY68kBMfb7ujJHSJrDJAQrJg.

[96] Abd al-Halim Khaddam was emphatic on this point, interview with the author, September 16, 2009, Paris.

[97] 'A New Partner in Syria?,' *Washington Post*, December 24, 2008; 'How did Assad manage to gain international respect?' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, December 26, 2008.

irony when he said, "The difference between Hamas and Hama is just one letter."[98] Nonetheless, Bashar al-Asad's newfound popularity from his support of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, made it difficult for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (now based in London) to continue active opposition against the Syrian regime. And in January 2009 they called an unprecedented truce with the Asad dynasty.[99]

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's temporary normalisation of ties with the Asad dynasty had another important implication. It led to the termination of their alliance with Abd al-Halim Khaddam and the demise of the most promising Syrian opposition movement in decades, the NSF.[100] The end of effective opposition, the easing of international pressure and his new found popularity in the Muslim world gave the Syrian president cause to feel confident about his propects.[101] However, Bashar al-Asad's miscalculation of Syrian domestic circumstances and his mistaken overconfidence in his popularity among the Sunni Muslim majority spelled danger for the regime and the situation of Syria's Alawites.

Rising Domestic Threats to the Asad Dynasty

Ibn Khaldun's theories about the rise and decline of dynasties included a great deal of consideration for economic and environmental factors and the resulting social and political implications. Concerning the end of dynasties he wrote:

> In the later years of dynasties famines and pestilences become numerous ... as people refrain from cultivating the soil ... [due to] attacks on property and tax

[98] 'Hamas rejects UN call for Gaza ceasefire,' *Guardian*, UK, January 9, 2008.

[99] *Ynet*, Israel, January 8th, 2008, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3652614,00.html. This was more likely a strategic move by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood rather than a genuine ideological shift, see: Liad Porat, 'The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Asad Regime,' *Middle East Brief*, No.47, December 2010, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University.

[100] 'Syrian Muslim Brotherhood withdraws from the Opposition National Salvation Front,' *Ex Oriente Lux*, April 5, 2009, http://orientelux.com/?p=31 ; 'Syrian opposition group collapses,' *The National*, Abu Dhabi, April 22, 2009.

[101] Roula Khalaf and Anna Fifield, 'An assured Assad,' *Financial Times*, May 10, 2009; 'Arab public opinion 2009,' *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2009, http://lynch.Foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/arab_public_opinion_in_2009.

> revenue ... [and] trouble occurs as a result of unrest of the subjects and the great number encouraged by the senility of the dynasty to rebel.[102]

Like Ibn Khadun's theoretical dynasty, environmental and socio-economic problems posed serious challenges to the position of the Asad dynasty in the late 2000s. The income gap increased visibly and economic hardship became pronounced through population growth and inflation.[103] In addition Ibn Khaldun's "attacks on property and tax revenue" were perhaps reflected in the "predatory self enrichment" in the Syrian economy of regime figures like Rami Makhlouf.[104] If the Syrian economy continued to deteriorate the potential for domestic upheaval or rebellion would threaten the position of the regime. Moreover, tough economic times could pose a threat to Alawites from rising religious conservatism among the Sunni majority. The 'Little Ice Age' and related socio-economic decline of the thirteenth century had, for example, helped shape the fundamentalism of people like Ibn Taymiyya.[105] Thus, Bashar al-Asad's handling of the challenging economic times ahead carried direct implications for the Alawite security.

In September 2009, five months after the collapse of the NSF coalition, Abd al-Halim Khaddam expressed to this writer, grave concerns about rising pressures in Syria:

> Thirty percent of the workforce in Syria is currently unemployed and the inflation has gone way out of control. The rising prices of the basic goods people need have gone to nearly five times since 2000. All the corruption that you can see happening

[102] Ibn Khaldun, *The Mqaddimah*, p. 255-256.

[103] 'Between 1995 and 2005 the Syrian population increased by 29 percent and the working age population rose by 48 percent,' see Paul Rivlin, ed., 'Syria, Lost Potential,' in *Arab Economies in the Twenty-First Century*, (Cambridge: Leiden University Press, 2009), pp. 240-265.

[104] Sǿren Schmidt, 'The Developmental Role of the State in the Middle East: Lessons from Syria,' in Hinnebusch R. (ed.) *The State and the Political Economy of Reform in Syria*, St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria, p.33.

[105] Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2008), pp. 135-136.

> in Syria means that the government cannot control what's happening in Syria, it has gone out of control. There was a middle class in Syria that was actually involved in every aspect of political, economic and social life. This class, this middle class is completely vanished. There are only two classes of people now. There is the bottom one, which is the majority of the people, they are very poor. On the other hand, you see the other class that consists of maybe five hundred people, which are in control of all the wealth, all the businesses, everything.[106]

Khaddam's evaluation of the Syrian economy and wealth distribution painted a picture of a country on the edge of upheaval and revolution. This was possibly wishful thinking on the part of an ardent regime opponent. However, as the events of 2011-2012 showed, his appraisal of the potential impacts of rising socio-economic pressures was accurate.

Bashar al-Asad's management of the Syrian economy was made more difficult by the numerous challenges the country faced in the latter half of the decade. These included dwindling oil supplies, the United States' economic sanctions, the global credit crisis in 2008, and the impacts of severe drought in 2007-2010.[107] Yet, from 2007 onwards the Asad dynasty failed to adequately address rising pressures within Syrian society. These pressures can be grouped into four categories: economic, political, environmental, and religious.

Economic pressures

Since the beginning of Asad rule in 1971, Syria's modest oil reserves had been a key strategic asset. Oil revenue has played a significant role as an economic safety net propping up the Syrian economy and financing the regime's operations, including its large security apparatus.[108] Thus, declining proceeds from oil became a serious problem, especially after Syria lost most of its economic interests in

---

[106] Abd al-Halim Khaddam, interview with the author, Paris September 16, 2009.

[107] See UNDP report 'Impact of the World Economic Downturn on Syrian Economy, Inequality and Poverty,' November 3, 2009; also IMF Country Report No. 10/86, March 2010; *Gulf News*, April 30, 2009.

[108] Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1995), p. 136.

Lebanon in 2005.[109] Oil production lowered from 548,000 barrels per day in 2000 to 380,000 in 2009 and was set to rapidly decline further in the absence of new finds.[110] The Asad regime's main compensating strategy was to promote itself as a regional transit hub for oil and gas.[111] An example was the proposed reopening of an oil line between Kirkuk, in Iraq, to Banyas on the Syrian coast.[112] Paradoxically, political imperatives conflicted with this potentially lucrative economic opportunity.

The Asad dynasty's need to confront the potential threat of a resurgent, democratic Iraq seemingly outweighed the benefits of developing good economic relations with its eastern neighbour. Despite promises by the Syrian Prime Minister, Mohammad Naji al-'Otri, that Syria would stop the flow of Sunni fighters into Iraq, the Asad regime soon reopened its border for al-Qaeda and other fighters.[113] Shortly thereafter the deal was scrapped by the Iraqis.[114] In effect the Asad dynasty could not afford for Iraq to stabilise into a democratic multi-sectarian state.[115] This would also set a dangerous precedent for its Alawite support base that Asad rule was not essential to their long term security. In addition, constrained Islamist fighters could turn their sights back onto the 'Alawite regime' in Syria. The implications of placing its political security ahead of

---

[109] Between 2003 and 2007 oil related proceeds decreased from 14.7 percent to 3.8 percent of GDP, see IMF Report No. 07/288, p. 32.

[110] US Energy Information Administration, 'Syria Analysis,' available at http://205.254.135.7/countries/cab.cfm?fips=SY; BP Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2011, bp.com/statisticalreview; see also *Syria Today*, Damascus, Issue 55, November 2009.

[111] Bashar al-Asad's trips to Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2009 were all focused on realising this objective, see: 'Syria's President: "Azerbaijan gave consent to sell 1 billion cubic meters of gas per year to Syria at current prices"*APA*, July 11, 2009, http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=104976; 'Al- Assad begins an official visit to Azerbaijan,' *SNS*, Damascus, July 9, 2009, http://sns.sy/sns/?path=news/read/2978; 'Syrian President due in Armenia on June 17,' *Turkish Weekly*, Istanbul, June 16, 2009.

[112] 'Iraq, Syria agree on plan to repair Kirkuk-Banias oil line,' *Oil & Gas Journal*, Los Angeles, April 24, 2009, http://www.ogj.com/display_article/360224/120/ARTCL/none/Trasp/1/Iraq,-Syria-agree-on-plan-to-repair-Kirkuk-Banias-oil-line/.

[113] Nimrod Raphaeli, 'The Missed Opportunity of the Iraq-Syria Oil Pipeline: Syria Chooses Terrorism over Long-Term Economic Gains,' *Memri*, May 18, 2009, Inquiry and Analysis - *No. 515*, http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA51509.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of* Change, Adelphi paper, No. 366 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 66.

Syria's economic prosperity proved hazardous by adding to rising social pressures inside Syria. One more economic setback attached to the Syrian regime's Iraq policy was the renewal of United States sanctions against Syria by Barack Obama on May 8, 2009.[116]

Another lost economic opportunity was the re-opening of discussions in 2009 between the European Union (EU) and Syria for an economic association agreement, shelved since the Hariri murder in 2005. Despite obvious signs that Bashar al-Asad was not reform minded, or inclined towards the West, the European Union (EU) offered to complete the agreement with Syria. This agreement could have opened lucrative trade and investment opportunities for the struggling Syrian economy.[117] Yet, similarly to the Iraqi deal, Bashar al-Asad chose political priorities over economic opportunities and the agreement was left unsigned by the Syrian government. Provisions calling for improvements in human rights, appended to the document by the Dutch government, were partly the cause for the Syrian regime's reluctance to commit itself to the agreement.[118] But other considerations such as loyalty to Iran and newly established good relations with Turkey convinced Bashar al-Asad that he did not need the EU association agreement.

The international financial crisis that began in 2008 also had a detrimental effect on the Syrian economy. Although the primitive state of the Syrian financial sector sheltered the country from the worst effects of the recession, there was an indirect effect as an estimated 50,000 Syrians, who had been working abroad in

[116] *Washington Post*, May 9, 2009.

[117] See Anja Zorob, 'Trade Liberalization and Adjustment via Regional Integration: The Syrian-European Association Agreement,' in *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Relationship*, R. Hinnebusch (ed.) University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

[118] 'Syria raises doubts about signing EU partnership,' *AFP*, France, October 14, 2009, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hhTUW9gcG92cTzf9Yn2hEaCZwBLQ; On the EU. association agreement Bashar al-Asad said in November 2009: "the partner has to be a friend and we have never seen this during the latest years," *Cham Press*, Damascus, November 13, 2009, http://www.champress.net/index.php?q=en/Article/view/47949.

the Gulf States, were laid off and returned home.[119] This had two negative consequences: the loss of remittance income, and upward pressure on Syria's unemployment figures, which already 'officially' stood at twelve percent in 2008.[120] Syria's high unemployment rate also explains the regime's decision not to allow Iraqi refugees permission to work in Syria.[121]

The Asad dynasty tried to speed up liberalising economic reforms to combat the recession. These measures proved inadequate, however, and in many instances only served to increase economic problems. One prime example was the establishment of the Damascus Securities Exchange (DSE) on March 10, 2009, initially listing six companies.[122] The regime tried to entice Syrians to invest in the DSE and to put their money into banks. The governor of the Central Bank of Syria (CBS), Adib Mayaleh, said "We want to encourage the Syrian public to subscribe to these public offerings and change the mentality of keeping cash under the mattress."[123] In the absence of transparent financial institutions, however, Syrians were reluctant to trust the government with their money.[124] Overall, the partial liberalisation of the Syrian economy appeared to only increase the earning potential of those close to the regime, such as Rami Makhlouf.[125]

Growing disaffection and anger about the Asad dynasty's economic performance emerged among the Ba'ath Party's traditional support base, the rural

---

[119] 'Tough time ahead for returning Syrians,' *The National*, UAE, June, 12, 2009.

[120] 'Arab countries should coordinate crisis response, to avoid social backlash,' *Business Intelligence Middle East*, May 17, 2009, http://www.bi-me.com/main.php?id=36359&t=1&c=62&cg=4&mset.

[121] 'Tallying the Cost,' *Syria Today*, Damascus, July 7, 2009, http://www.syria-today.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2017:tallying-the-cost&catid=33:business-features&Itemid=8.

[122] 'Syria launches long-awaited stock exchange as part of moves to liberalize economy,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, March 11, 2009.

[123] 'Syria attracts cash, to boost capital rules,' *Trade Arabia*, July 7, 2009, http://www.tradearabia.com/news/newsdetails.asp?Sn=ECO&artid=164585 ; 'Syria – Pursuing partnership with the Private sector,' *Global Arab Network*, November 11, 2009.

[124] *Forbes*, October 26, 2009, http://www.forbes.com/2009/10/23/syria-unctad-trade-business-oxford-analytica.html.

[125] Sǿren Schmidt, 'The Developmental Role of the State in the Middle East: Lessons from Syria,' in *The State and the Political Economy of Reform in Syria*, ed. R. Hinnebusch, (St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria, 2009) p. 33.

peasantry, workers and the bureaucracy, among whom ordinary Alawites were heavily represented. The Syrian General Federation of Trade Unions published a statement in 2009 saying: "Where are the results of economic reform? [...] The rich have become richer and the poor poorer [...] low-income earners who make up 80 percent of the Syrian population are looking for additional work to support themselves."[126]

Another income source the Asad dynasty favoured was tourism.[127] This sector did indeed hold considerable promise for Syria. In 2008-2009 tourism contributed US 3.9 billion dollars to Syria's economy,[128] and according to the Syrian Ministry of Tourism, accounted for eleven percent of GDP by 2009, with an average of 5.4 million visitors per year (mostly Arabs from the Gulf States.)[129] In addition a cooperation deal with Turkey held promise for Syria's tourist trade,[130] and more European visitors began to venture to Syria in 2009.[131]

Many of the country's main tourist sites are located in the North-West Alawite region. Similarly to the 1920s, there was good potential for Alawites to profit from their natural environment through international tourism. The regime's openness to private foreign investment meant however, that local operators struggle to compete. For example, Syria's premier five star beach resort the Afamia Rotana, frequented by regime figures and foreign dignitaries, is owned by

---

[126] 'Dardari Defends Syria's Economic Reforms,' *Syria Today*, Damascus, Issue.56, December 2009.

[127] See for example 'Opening to tourism, Syria flaunts hidden treasures,' *Reuters*, July 16, 2009, http://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSTRE56G00C20090717?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=0.

[128] 'Income of $ 3.9 billion from international tourism in Syria,' *Syria News Station*, Damascus, June 15, 2009, http://sns.sy/sns/?path=news/read/2294b.

[129] 'Syrian tourism grows fast amidst economic crisis,' *Xinhua*, China, August 10, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-08/10/content_11858058.htm.

[130] 'Turkey, Syria extend cooperation to tourism,' *Today's Zaman*, Istanbul, November 5, 2009, http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-192048-102-turkey-syria-extend-cooperation-to-tourism.html.

[131] 'Syria – emerging attractive tourist destination,' *Global Arab Network*, London, September 1, 2009, http://www.english.globalarabnetwork.com/200909012498/Travel/syria-emerging-attractive-tourist-destination.html.

a Saudi Arabian company.[132] Over-reliance on tourism would prove hazardous in the medium to long term however, as it is an industry heavily dependent on a stable and secure domestic situation. As would be shown the Asad dynasty was unable to preserve this level of stability.

One outlet for economically challenged Syrians was Lebanon. In 2009 an estimated 300,000 Syrians worked in Lebanon, mainly in construction. However, the pay and work conditions of these workers were very poor and they often suffered discrimination and abuse.[133] A poignant moment for this researcher came when speaking to a Syrian shoe polisher hunched in an ostentatious Beirut waterfront street. When asked why he came to Lebanon, he said he had eight children and there was no work in Syria. Yet despite his obvious destitution, when asked his opinion of the Syrian president he said, with a worried expression, *"hu'ay qua'is"* (he's excellent). This response may have come from genuine admiration, but it seemed to come from an ingrained fear of criticising Syria's leadership, which was apparent even outside Syria.

Political Pressures

Harsh political repression was a feature of Syrian life ever since the internal troubles of the 1970s and early 1980s. However, there had existed an unspoken 'social contract' guaranteeing economic security through subsidies, government jobs, free education and healthcare, in return for forgoing political freedoms. Under Bashar al-Asad this 'contract' was compromised. Hence, more people began seriously questioning their lack of political freedoms. In late August 2007, large posters of United States based Reform Party leader, Farid Ghadry, appeared

[132] 'Rotana opens its first Syrian beach resort hotel,' *Travel Daily News*, Athens, June 22, 2009, http://www.traveldailynews.com/pages/show_page/31562-Rotana-opens-its-first-Syrian-beach-resort-hotel.

[133] 'Lebanon-Syria: Wretched conditions for Syrian workers,' *IRIN*, April 14, 2009,' http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=83900 ; the poor living and working conditions of Syrians in Lebanon was confirmed to this writer during a visit to Lebanon in 2011. See also: John Chalcroft, *The Invisible Cage, Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

in Damascus, Aleppo and nearby Idlib.[134] According to Reform Party sources the posters remained up for a few hours and were put up by a group of young Syrians.[135] Bashar al-Asad reacted by taking the extreme measure, often considered illegal under international law, of revoking Ghadry's Syrian citizenship.[136] Farid Ghadry had already raised the ire of the Syrian regime by addressing the Israeli Knesset and raising possibilities for resolving the Syrian-Israeli conflict,[137] a key platform of the Asad dynasty's legitimacy. The appearance of the posters demonstrated that Ghadry enjoyed support in Syria, which no doubt infuriated and deeply concerned Asad.

The Syrian president's response to the problem of political dissent remained brutal deterrence. Dutch diplomats, involved in the EU Association agreement, were right to question the ongoing human rights record of Syria, which had certainly not improved by the end of Bashar al-Asad's first decade in power.[138] Syria's prisons remained full of political prisoners, who even when released were subjected to intimidation and discrimination.[139] Conditions inside Syria's prisons were hellish with torture a common event. Two riots were ruthlessly put down with lethal force at Sednaya Prison, north of Damascus, in July[140] and December 2008.[141] Dozens of bodies from the riots were reportedly secretly buried at night to keep the massacres from public exposure.[142] Moreover, human rights activists were arrested in greater numbers, and the State Security

[134] 'Opposition in Syria raises its head,' *Ynet*, Israel, September 3, 2007 http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3445000,00.html.

[135] Ibid.

[136] 'Assad revokes citizenship of politician who visited Knesset,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, Sept 15, 2007.

[137] 'Exiled Syrian reformer urges return of Golan - but not to Assad,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, June 11, 2007.

[138] 'Dutch Foreign Minister, in Syria, calls for 'bold steps,' *Earth Times*, June 23, 2009, http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/274340,dutch-foreign-minister-in-syria-calls-for-bold-steps.html.

[139] 'Ex-Political Prisoners Remain Outcasts,' *IWPR*, Damascus, January 9, 2009, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=syr&s=f&o=349011&apc_state=henh.

[140] 'Blackout on July Unrest at Sednaya Amid Reports of More Violence,' *Human Rights Watch*, January 27, 2009, http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/01/27/syria-reveal-inmates-conditions.

[141] 'Syria accused of covering up deaths of 25 prisoners,' *Telegraph*, UK, April 30, 2009

[142] Ibid.

Court remained arbitrary in its verdicts and sentencing.[143] In the absence of economic security, continued repression by the Syrian state only pushed people towards exasperation, despair and resentment against the regime.

Environmental Pressures

Perhaps the most critical challenges to the Asad dynasty were caused by the drought that gripped the country from the summer of 2007. The drought decimated Syria's agriculture sector, which accounted for twenty three percent of Syria's GDP.[144] Previously a net exporter, Syria became a net importer of wheat and corn, for example, they were forced to import a record 1.8 million tonnes of corn in 2009.[145] The drought also exacerbated Syria's chronic electricity production problems with a 1000 megawatt deficit in 2009 that resulted in daily (twice daily in some areas) outages across the country.[146] A Syrian official in charge of development and investment stated that the drought could pose a bigger problem for Syria than the global financial crisis: "it adds to the misery of less income and less spending, and this affects economic growth."[147] While the official was using the term 'misery' to describe macroeconomic implications for Syria's economy, it was an appropriate term for the physical misery that was being experienced by ordinary (particularly rural) Syrians.

Ordinary Alawites were particularly susceptible to the problems caused by economic stagnation and the drought. Tobacco crops in the Latakia region were adversely affected and many Alawites felt forced to start cutting down oak trees to make charcoal to sell for use in *nargile* pipes popular in cafes around the

---

[143] For a full examination of Syria's human rights record under Bashar al-Asad see: '*A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Asad's First Ten Years in Power,*' (Human Rights Watch, New York, 2010).

[144] 'Syria: Drought exacerbates economic woes,' *IRIN*, Damascus, March 4, 2009, http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=83292.

[145] *Cattle Network*, May 13, 2009, http://www.cattlenetwork.com/Content.asp?ContentID=314143 (accessed May 14, 2009).

[146] *Al-Thawra*, Damascus, August 9, 2009, translated and cited in, *AFP*, France August 9, 2009, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5htmizu2w29_9Ovwv40osK_6Zxtxw.

[147] *IRIN*, Damascus, March 4, 2009.

country. This practice threatened to cause extensive deforestation of the Jabal Sahiliyah.[148] Despite having experienced extensive poverty throughout their occupation of the Jabal Sahiliyah, the Alawites had always managed to preserve its forests. The Alawites attached great spiritual value to the natural features of their mountain, so to be forced to degrade that environment indicated the severity of their socio-economic hardship. On visits to Alawite villages by this writer in 2009, the conversation invariably revolved around their dire financial circumstances, lack of work opportunities and the detrimental effects of the drought on their crops.

Rural Syrians from all communities faced severe struggles to sustain their livelihoods. The drought forced tens of thousands of rural Syrians into the cities, 160 villages in Northern Syria were completely abandoned.[149] One student from the Hasakeh region in north east Syria explained to this writer in 2011 how virtually his entire village left to look for work in Damascus. Another badly affected region was southern Syria around Dera'a and Suwayda.[150] The Asad dynasty was not sensitive enough to the suffering of rural Syrians or cognisant of the potential for civil unrest from building socio-economic pressures. In one incident, a government decision to tighten building regulations resulted in the demolition of temporary housing near Damascus, which led to a clash with authorities who killed four rural migrants.[151]

---

[148] *Environment News Service*, Latakia, July 13, 2009, http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jul2009/2009-07-13-02.asp (accessed July 16, 2009).

[149] '160 Syrian villages deserted 'due to climate change', *AFP*, Paris, June 6, 2009, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jXbS8a3ggiMm4ekludBbmWQMb-HQ ; 'Syria: Drought driving farmers to the cities,' IRIN, Damascus, September 2, 2009, http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=85963.

[150] 'Severe drought affects 1.3 million in Syria,' *Christian Science Monitor*, September 18, 2009, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0918/p06s04-wome.html.

[151] 'Four die in clashes over demolitions near Damascus,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, June 4, 2009.

Religious Pressures and Bashar al-Asad's Disconnection

In 2009 this writer asked Abd al-Halim Khaddam whether he thought increasing corruption, inequality and rising poverty could translate to renewed sectarian tensions in Syria. Khaddam's initial reaction rose from his strong Ba'athist instinct to downplay issues of sectarianism: "In Syria there are both Christian and Muslims. They are very religious but they are not radicals." However, he conceded that he harboured concerns about rising resentment among the Syrian majority against a perceived sectarian bias in Syria stemming from socio-economic hardship:

> The people are starting to see that, whenever an employment position comes up for anything – a normal person cannot just go and take that place, there is a somehow, a racial background to that [...] Now you can see that there are some racial tensions in Syria. These tensions are growing now; they can of course pose a threat on the unity of Syria [...] if the regime continues the way it is now, radicalism is going to grow in Syria. At some point something is going to happen, it's going to explode.[152]

This prediction by Abd al-Halim Khaddam for a social explosion in Syria with possible 'racial' (sectarian) fault lines carried serious implications for the Syrian Alawites and their future security. If Khaddam was correct it would show that while the Asad dynasty had been focused on reconsolidating its position against external threats, a far greater threat was emerging within Syria itself.

To examine latent sectarian tensions in Syria it is helpful to compare the ongoing tensions in Tripoli between Alawites and Sunnis.[153] A major factor in Tripoli tensions has been socio-economic hardship caused by scarce work

---

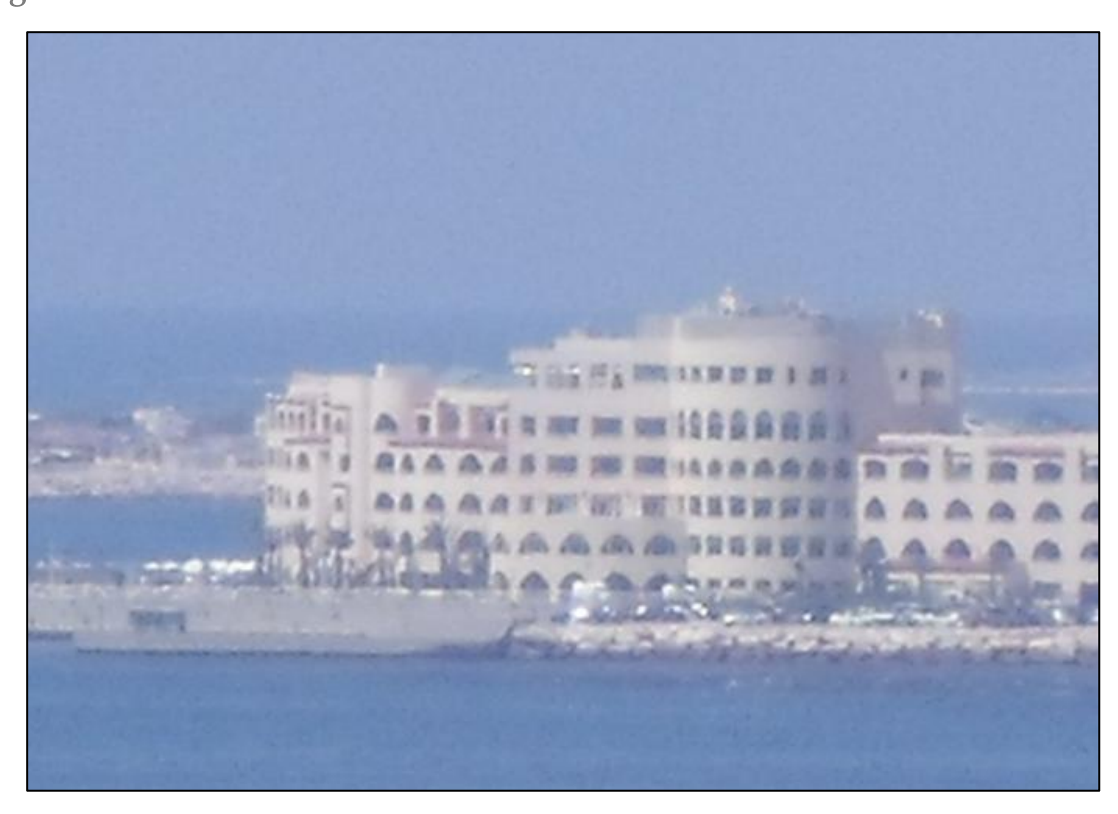
[152] Ibid.

[153] For example an explosive device was detonated near the home of Tripoli Alawite leader Rifa'at Eid in August 2009, see: *Adnkronos*, Italy, August 13, 2009, 'Lebanon: Three injured in bomb attack in northern port cist ,' http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Security/?id=3.0.3653410406 ; see also: 'Spate of security incidents rattles Lebanon,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, September 24, 2009.

opportunities.[154] Thus it could be argued that similar socio-economic problems in Syria could lead to emerging sectarian tensions in Syria. During Hafiz al-Asad's rule the centralised command economy of Syria, while failing to enrich the country, provided a basic safety net and restrained disparities in wealth.[155] Sectarian tensions, caused by perceptions of inequality and injustice, were however, becoming clearly evident during this writer's second trip to Syria in March 2011.

On one occasion I went with two (Sunni) Syrian acquaintances from drought stricken North East Syria, to the *bahr* (beach) a few kilometres north of Latakia. My friends were excited at the prospect of spending a day at the seaside. The area reserved for public access was perhaps two hundred metres long and was poorly maintained with rubbish everywhere.

Figure 14. The Rotana Afamia Resort near Latakia



Source: the author, August, 2009

[154] Sebastian Malo, 'From bullets to paint brushes in Bab al-Tabbaneh,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, May 22, 2009.

[155] This was especially so after the termination of Rifa'at al-Asad's overt corruption inside Syria.

Beyond a fence was a long and inviting stretch of beach. When our small group rounded the fence a man in civilian clothes and a dog quickly appeared and told us this was government property and we must leave. Directly across from where we stood, the Afamia Rotana resort was visible with its own private beach (see Figure 14). As we walked back to the public enclosure, one of my Syrian friends remarked below his breath, in surprisingly good English vernacular, "f### the government, they take everything from us." I was later told, without any prompting, that the man who expelled us from the beach was Alawite.The implicit association between Alawites and government control was palpable in my friend's tone.

Returning from the beach by taxi, the driver, who was also Alawite, was drinking a can of beer and jokingly offered a sip to one of my Sunni companions who replied angrily, "*la! Ana Muslim*" (No! I'm a Muslim). The taxi driver responded that he too was Muslim (Alawite Muslim), and the conversation threatened to become heated. My other friend recognised the danger in the subject and quickly made a light hearted quip to defuse the situation. These incidents gave a glimpse of the 'tinder box' residing beneath the surface of Syrian society with dangerous implications for Alawite security. On one hand the Alawites were directly associated with the Asad regime and its deprivation of basic liberties to most Syrians; and on the other hand, they were still not considered 'proper' Muslims by the bulk of the Sunni Muslim population of Syria.[156]

When I first arrived in Syria in August 2009 the country was at the height of the drought of 2007-2010. Upon leaving the airport the first question I asked the taxi driver was, "why does everyone smoke?" he acerbically replied, "Life is hard." Smoking was some small comfort for Syrians in their otherwise bleak socio-economic circumstances. An indication of the disconnection of Bashar al-

[156] I discussed this point by with numerous Sunni Muslim acquaintances in Syria and the overwhelming consensus was that Alawites were not 'genuine' Muslims. This view is shared by some Shi'ites who consider Alawites extremists (*Ghulat*).

Asad in this regard can be seen in his decree of December 2009, which banned smoking in cafes, restaurants and public places.[157] Meanwhile, in the Jabal Sahiliyah strict penalties were imposed for tree felling, and the regime expended considerable funds in registering individual trees. Around Slunfeh, at the peak of the Jabal Sahiliyah, this writer observed that every single tree was numbered with a steel plaque. While these measures may have seemed forward thinking, and in line with the policies of many Western countries, for ordinary Syrians they were further cause for rising frustration and despair.

The lack of appreciation by the Syrian regime of building social tensions was illustrated up by Prime Minister Naji al-'Otri, who said in December 2009 that,

> [...] in spite of the climate changes and drought which Syria suffered during the past three years, reflecting negatively on the agricultural sector in addition to the world financial crisis and its repercussions, Syria has managed to alleviate their impact thanks to precautionary and pre-emptive measures.[158]

In reality the dire socio-economic situation of Syrians at the end of 2009 held many of the ingredients for Abd al-Halim Khaddam's predicted 'social explosion.' The fact that most ordinary Alawites shared in economic difficulties with the rest of the country however, actually served as a point of commonality that could lessen their estrangement and thus, their 'asabiyya for the Asad dynasty. On the other hand, the resilience of sectarian 'asabiyya could mean that if Alawites remained firmly attached to the regime, when the 'explosion' came it

---

[157] 'Syria issues tough new law against killer tobacco,' *IRIN*, Damascus, December 3, 2009, http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=87304.

[158] 'PM Otri Makes an Economic Review at NPF Branches Meeting, Rate of GDP Increased to SYP 1343.2 billions in 2008,' *ChamPress*, Damascus, December 9, 2009, http://www.champress.net/index.php?q=en/Article/view/49749

could topple the Asad dynasty and also lead to negative consequences for the Alawites as a whole.

Overall, this writer's observations during field work in 2009 and 2011 gave the strong impression that cumulative social pressures from economic, political, environmental and religious factors constituted a grave risk to the position of the Asad dynasty. The lack of opportunity in Syria was evident in the sheer numbers of idle men sitting around smoking, or engaged in petty hawking, shoe polishing or even begging. The everyday challenges faced by most Syrians could not be alleviated by their president's rhetoric about 'steadfast resistance' against Israel or America.

A Rising Islamic Tide?

An editorial in the state newspaper, *al-Thawra*, in early 2007 read: "Syria has a great deal of confidence now [...] The country is convinced that the major pressures that once faced us have disappeared. We want to offer security - that's what we offer. The Americans, they offer Iraq, which is chaos."[159] The sectarian chaos in Iraq provided Alawites with a demonstration of the consequences of political upheaval, but was of course, partly a result of the Syrian regime's destabilising efforts commenced in 2003. Regime rhetoric about offering security from the 'chaos' sweeping the region was a persuasive tool in the hands of the Asad dynasty and assisted greatly in the maintenance of Alawite 'asabiyya.

Alongside the immediate threat of Sunni radicalism, a general rise in conservative Islamic values in Syria posed a challenge to the ongoing security of Alawites. While the Asad dynasty presented itself as the Alawites' protector against these rising threats, it actually played a large part in their development. Paradoxically, therefore, the best chance for Alawite security in Syria was to abandon the Asad dynasty and finally seek genuine integration in Syrian society,

[159] Cited in Hassan M. Fattah, 'Assad grows into role of Syria's iron ruler,' *New York Times*, May 24, 2007.

as was the original intention of the Alawite political and religious leadership in 1936.

Throughout Bashar al-Asad's rule there was a general erosion of the strict secularism, which was the aspect of Ba'ath ideology so important to Alawite political status and security. This is evident in the economic sector. By 2007 Syria's first Islamic banking institution received the go ahead from the government.[160] This was partly a result of Syria's new alliance structure (now without the Soviet Union), which was heavily reliant on Muslim states. Dwindling Syrian oil and gas reserves negated the ability to operate a low level rentier economy and necessitated the need to encourage foreign investment, particularly from the wealthy, Sunni dominated, Gulf region.[161] One potential avenue for economic development that did not involve decreasing the secular basis of the state, or implementing political reforms, was fostering relations with China.[162] For China, however, Syria is only one of many potential political, strategic and economic partners and, most likely, quite low in its list of foreign policy priorities.[163] Conversely for Iran and the Gulf States, despite its weak economy, Syria is a vital cog in regional politics. Hence the Asad dynasty has been forced to focus on the Muslim world for the bulk of foreign investment and economic support, which meant pressure continued to be exerted on the secular nature of the Syrian state.

Although Alawites preferred strict secularism, in a well functioning regional economy, even if the predominant political-economic system was Islamic based, Alawites could hope to enjoy reasonable security. This was the case at various times during the Ottoman period; for instance, in the seventeenth and

---

[160] 'Licence obtained for Syria Venture,' *Gulf Times*, UAE, May 16, 2007 ; 'First bank under Islamic law opens in Syria,' *Jerusalem Post*, August 27, 2007; see also: 'Syria eyes $30 bln Foreign investments,' *Reuters*, London, June 25, 2009, http://www.reuters.com/article/rbssFinancialServicesAndRealEstateNews/idUSLP22304420090625.

[161] See: 'Arab banks seek Syria entry as economy grows,' *Gulf Times*, UAE, June 6, 2007.

[162] See: 'Syria welcomes more Chinese investment in telecom sector,' *Xinhua*, China, August 28, 2007.

[163] On Chinese-Syrian economic relations see: Ben Simpfendorfer, *The New Silk Road*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.76-97.

eighteenth centuries Alawites carved out a niche in the tobacco industry and were relatively well tolerated by the Ottoman authorities. It was only during more turbulent times, such as the Mamluks' strategic and economic crises of the fourteenth century, that fundamentalist Islam increased and posed critical threats to Alawite security. The regional equation in 2007-2008 more resembled the latter definition. The economic situation was bleak across most of the region which, combined with conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the ongoing Palestinian issue, had the effect of swelling the importance of religion in Middle Eastern society.

In Syria, both the Damascus Spring and the fall of the Iraqi Ba'athists had raised the expectations of many Syrians for political change, yet both had ended in disappointment. Several years on, disillusionment and frustration, exacerbated by high unemployment, high inflation and the effects of the ongoing drought, were setting in among a growing portion of Syrian society. A veteran political dissident from the Syrian Communist Party, Riad al-Turk voiced his concerns in May 2007:

> An earthquake can be avoided if Bashar chooses the path of reconciliation, democratic change and ousting of the corrupt [...] It could happen, but I don't expect it [...] Where does the ordinary citizen go? He goes toward God to save him from this misery and he is embraced by the clerics. When the citizen has no option he becomes an easy prey in the hands of the fundamentalists.[164]

In this context of rising religious sentiment, the Asad dynasty's double game of restricting fundamentalism in Syrian society, whilst encouraging it elsewhere as a foreign policy tool, became increasingly difficult to balance. Signs emerged that the regime was losing control of the situation. On September 28, 2007 the jihadist preacher Abu al-Qa'qa' was shot dead outside his mosque in Aleppo. Al-Qa'qa's aide claimed that "his killers do not want Muslims to unite."[165]

---

[164] 'Embrace democracy: Syria's top dissident urges Assad,' *Khaleej Times*, May 16, 2007.

[165] 'Syria: Prominent cleric - who supported Iraqi resistance – assassinated,' *Al-Bawaba*, Amman, September 28, 2007, http://www.albawaba.com/en/countries/Iraq/217288.

This could be read as an accusation against the Syrian regime, who perhaps felt that al-Qa'qa' was becoming too influential as a Muslim leader. Another interpretation is that he had fallen out with other Muslim fundamentalists for his collusion with the "heretical" Alawite dynasty.[166]

Both interpretations are plausible, and either could indicate negative developments for the Asad dynasty in its dealings with Islamist forces. If al-Qa'qa' was becoming so influential that he had to be liquidated, it signals that the regime was losing control. Conversely, if al-Qa'qa was killed because of his cooperation with the Asad dynasty, it shows that Bashar al-Asad could not control the Islamists within his borders who were turning their sights toward his regime. The latter interpretation would demonstrate the effects of Syrian fighters returning from Iraq imbued with al-Qaeda ideologies for restoring Islamic rule to 'Bilad al-Sham'.[167]

Al-Qaeda and similar groups began turning their sights on the Syrian regime from late 2005, and increasingly so from 2007 after the US 'troop surge' in Iraq.[168] On May 27, 2007 a militant Islamic group named the 'Monotheism and Jihad Group' led by a man named Abu Jandal al-Dimashqi (he was evidently from Damascus) urged the assassination of Bashar al-Asad in an audio-tape posted on the internet. In addition Abu Jandal, citing Ibn Taymiyya's fourteenth century *futya*, advised the 'physical annihilation' of the Alawites.[169] Talk about the '*kuffar*' (infidel) Shi'ites and 'Nusayris' also began emerging amongst radical Sunni

---

[166] 'Imam shot dead at Syrian mosque,' *AFP*, September 28, 2007, http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gWSgqmyNNAsHkUfeyEOmxhnQs2fg; see also ' Aleppo: Syria's Sleeping, Giant,' *Al-Jazeera*, June 23, 2011.

[167] Emmanuel Sivan, 'Arab - Speak Arabic,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, October 5, 2007.

[168] Murad Batal al-Shishani, 'Jihadis Turn their Eyes to Syria as a Post Iraq Theater of Operations,' *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol.VII, Issue.26, August 20, 2009, p.3-4, Jamestown Foundation.

[169] Nibras Kazimi, 'The Perfect Enemy,' *New York Sun*, June 1, 2007, http://www.nysun.com/opinion/perfect-enemy/55690/ ;'Explosion in Syria kills 15 soldiers,' *CTV News*, Canada, July 26, 2007, http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20070726/syria_explosion_070726/20070726?hub=World.

elements in Lebanon.[170] Signs of domestic instability paralleled the increase of Islamic extremism, for example, a large explosion at a military installation in Aleppo on July 26, 2007, killed fifteen soldiers. Official sources blamed high summer temperatures for setting off stored munitions.[171] Other sources claimed however, that the blast occurred at 4.30 in the morning when temperatures were cool,[172] which raises the possibility that it was an attack by an anti-regime group. Islamic fundamentalists, such as al-Qaeda, still only represented an extreme fringe element of the Sunni majority who remain moderate in their religious views. Nonetheless, the re-emergence of Ibn Taymiyya's radical ideas and intolerance of Alawites was a cause of concern for the community and reinforced their insecurity.

In late 2007 Bashar al-Asad appeared to try and change course and mitigate the effects of religious radicalism, which he had helped unleash. The regime attempted to reconsolidate Syria's standing as the 'beating heart' of Arabism by emphasising the Arabic language as the primary source of identity for Syrians.[173] Bashar al-Asad went as far as to announce guidelines for protecting the purity of the Arabic language from foreign corruption.[174] This was a belated step back towards Alawite interests, which are served by retaining secular Arabist-Ba'athist ideology based on emphasizing Arab identity over sectarian identity. For instance, the education system promoted under Hafiz al-Asad even tried to suppress any acknowledgment of divergence between the main branches of Islam.

Bashar al-Asad, mistakenly confident in his popularity and acceptance by the Sunni majority, allowed orthodox Sunni Islam to become the dominant

---

[170] For example see, *The National*, UAE, September 26, 2008.

[171] *CTV News*, Canada, July 26, 2007.

[172] 'Syria blast 'linked to chemical weapons': report,' *AFP*, London, September 19, 2007, http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5iJugIQvDKwkxupz9eULk1ml6OZ4Q.

[173] Emmanuel Sivan, 'Arab - Speak Arabic,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, October 5, 2007.

[174] *Ha'aretz*, Israel, October 5, 2007; see also 'President al-Assad Meets General Federation of Arab Writers Delegation,' *SANA*, Damascus, November 5, 2008, www.sana.sy/eng/142/2008/11/04/199887.htm.

religion in education and matters of state.[175] Meanwhile the Alawites, and other heterodox sects, became increasingly submerged in terms of their religion and identity. Thus, the Alawite elites of the Asad regime were actually cutting themselves off from their own community at the same time as exasperation and resentment against the regime was building in Syria's Sunni majority. Paradoxically, however, Alawite sectarian insecurity about Sunni *revanchism* actually pushed the community into closer support of the Asad regime.

Last Chance for Alawite Integration?

So was sectarian insecurity an inevitable part of Alawite political calculations ten years into the twenty-first century? A re-examination of the Lebanese Alawites provides a useful comparison. In contrast to Syria, open discussion of sectarian affiliation is politically and socially acceptable in Lebanon. Outwardly, it would seem persistent tensions in Tripoli show that the open Lebanese approach fails to circumvent sectarian conflict. This reading of the Lebanese situation would aid the assessments of those who have praised the Asad regime for its 'successful management' of Syria's diverse society.[176]

If a comparison is made with the region of Hatay in Southern Turkey however, a different picture emerges. This region contains a similarly diverse population including up to 500,000 Alawite Arabs,[177] a smaller population of Sunni Arabs, among a Sunni Turkish majority. Yet there has been very little evidence of sectarian conflict between communities despite an open political and religious environment. Moreover, periods of economic hardship in Hatay have not evolved into communal violence. This Sunni-Alawite coexistence belies the

---

[175] Shaykh 'Ali Yeral spoke with the author about how Bashar al-Asad moved closer to the Sunnis than his father.

[176] For example, see the comments of the UN's, Laurens Jolles, in ' Syria sees no sectarian strife among Iraqis,' *Baltimore Sun*, December 30, 2008, http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/world/iraq/bal-iraqirefugee1228-side,0,6495295.story.

[177] This figure is based on estimates provided by Alawite sources in Antakya, Turkey.

assertion, promoted by the Asad dynasty, that a strict authoritarian approach is necessary to preserve communal harmony.[178]

A key difference between the situation of the Alawites of Northern Lebanon and Hatay is the lack of political involvement by the Syrian regime in the latter.[179] Turkey is of course a much more powerful and stable state against whom, the Syrian regime would struggle to interfere in domestic affairs. Conversely Northern Lebanon is easily penetrated by Syrian political and strategic interests. Thus, the Asad dynasty's active involvement in Lebanon appears to be a major factor in Sunni-Alawite fighting in Tripoli.

In more open political environments there is long term potential for reconciliation between Sunni and Alawite communities. For example, reconciliation workshops were held for Sunni and Alawite youths in Tripoli in January 2009.[180] A similar dynamic can be detected in Iraq where, despite severe sectarian violence in recent years; given the choice, Iraqis have at least tried to reconcile between sects and move towards democratic pluralist political arrangements.[181] Conversely, for Syrian Alawites, the prohibition on sectarian discourse precludes any such efforts. Yet there is probably greater need for sectarian reconciliation in Syria, where serious grievances simmer; the major example being the events of Hama in 1982.

For the Alawites to have any chance to finally achieve genuine integration in Syrian society, they would need to recognise the hazardous path the Asad dynasty was leading the country down and break free of the Asad dynasty before

---

[178] For more information on Arab Alawites in Turkey see: G. Prochazka-Eisl, and S. Prozchazka, *The Plain of Saints and Prophets, The Nusayri-Alawi Community of Cilicia (Southern Turkey) and its Sacred Places*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).

[179] For evidence of Syria's ongoing political role in Tripoli see: 'Sectarian rivalry simmers beneath calm Tripoli,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, August 25, 2009; 'Palestinian groups deny involvement in Tripoli attacks,' *Daily Star*, Beirut, October 12, 2009.

[180] 'More stories from Lebanon's forgotten city – Tripoli,' *Menassat*, January 30th, 2009, http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/5898-confronting-stereotypes-forgotten-city-tripoli (accessed February 1, 2009).

[181] 'Secularism prevails in crucial Iraq vote,' *National Post*, Toronto, February 3, 2009, http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=1249627.

it was too late. The alleviation of sectarian insecurity would erode Alawite-Asad 'asabiyya and open the way for true integration in Syria. Two factors are critical to the achievement of this outcome. First, Syria's overwhelmingly youthful population are not necessarily as affected by sectarian thinking as their parents.[182] Second is the communication technology 'revolution' that has occurred in Syria, which connects this young generation in ways that the regime struggles to control.

There is evidence that cross-sectarian collaboration and conciliation, including Alawites, has been occurring at the grass roots level in Syria among Syria's younger generation. This movement is driven by a common desire for political freedoms and economic opportunities, and facilitated by new communication technologies like the internet, satellite television and cellular phones.[183] In 1996 the internet was unavailable to ordinary Syrians and in 2000 less than one percent was 'connected,' but by 2010 at least twenty-one percent of Syrians regularly used the internet.[184] These communication tools provided new platforms for open discussion that circumvented government prohibitions around political and religious discourse.

The Syrian regime only became conscious of the threat posed by the internet in recent years.[185] In June 2007 seven Syrian students were sentenced to prison terms for online dialogues about political reform, five received five year sentences and two seven years.[186] The sentences seemed unusually harsh;

---

[182] In 2005 twenty three percent of Syrians were aged 15-24, therefore in 2011, a large proportion of Syria's population would be approximately 20-34, see Navtej Dhillon & Tarik Yousef, eds., *Generation in Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East*, (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2009), p.189; see also Nader Kabbani & Noura Kamel, 'Youth Exclusion in Syria: Social, Economic, and Institutional Dimensions,' Working Paper – The Middle East Youth Initiative, No.4, September 2007, Wolfensohn Center for Development, Dubai.

[183] This impression was gained during many conversations by this author with young Syrians from all sects, all of whom must remain anonymous.

[184] UN Data, 'Percentage of individuals using the Internet – Syria,' available at, http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=Syria&d=ITU&f=ind1Code%3aI99H%3bcountryCode%3aSYR

[185] 'Syria intensifying Internet crackdown: watchdog,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 8, 2007.

[186] 'U.S. attacks Syria sentencing,' *UPI*, Washington, June 22, 2007, http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2007/06/22/US-attacks-Syria-sentencing/UPI-32291182551387/.

however, a comment attributed to the arresting Mukhabarat officer is revealing. He reportedly explained to the father of one of the arrested students: "these youths are more dangerous than al-Qaeda, because they come from all sects."[187] This comment is revealing for two reasons. It shows how the security establishment was anxious about Sunni fundamentalist al-Qaeda, but more importantly it shows that the regime viewed cross-sectarian dissent, involving Alawites, as the single biggest threat to the Asad dynasty. This would suggest a lessening of the Sunni-Alawite rift, which would indicate the decline of Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya. If it is conjectured, therefore, that two of the students were Alawite, this could explain why they were given longer seven year sentences. This conclusion is supported by the similar sentences imposed on Alawite economist Aref Dalila in 2001,[188] and Louay Hussein in 1984.[189]

The Asad dynasty directed substantial resources to monitoring online activity to confront the threat of cross-sectarian internet activism. In September 2007, 350 Mukhabarat recruits were dispatched by Asef Shawkat to Bonn, Berlin, London and North Korea to study advanced communications interception. It is uncertain whether German and British authorities were aware of this activity or if private consultants were covertly enlisted; the latter seems more likely. These presumably Alawite recruits were themselves monitored closely and restricted in their movements and ability to interact with expatriate Syrians.[190] Despite these measures, the Asad dynasty would continue to struggle to control online political dialogue and dissent.

In June 2009, Syrian Minister of Defense, General Hassan Turkmani told army officer graduates, "The communications' revolution that we witness

---

[187] O. Winter, *Memri*, July 31, 2007, 'Inquiry and Analysis - No. 378, 'Syrian Oppositionists Criticize Oppression of Young People in Syria, , http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/2315.htm.

[188] Tony Badran, 'Divided They Stand: The Syrian Opposition,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1, No.3, September-October 2006.

[189] Rula Amin, 'Syrian opposition figure triggers debate,' *Al-Jazeera*, July 11, 2011.

[190] 'Syrian Intelligence Training New Recruits in UK, Germany,' *AINA*, Washington, September 30, 2007, http://www.aina.org/news/20070930144804.htm.

nowadays requires us to possess qualifications and capabilities in all military performance fields to defend the homeland."[191] He was possibly referring to popular online forums like 'facebook,' which accelerated the process of connecting Syrians from different backgrounds within Syria and exposed them to political currents across the Arab world and beyond. The Asad dynasty recognised the danger of social media and found a pretext to ban 'facebook' in September 2009. They justified the measure as a protest against Israeli users in the Golan Heights who submitted their home address as 'Israel.'[192]

On visits to Syria this writer observed the popularity of internet cafes in every Syrian city, which were invariably full of young people in their twenties or early thirties. For monitoring purposes customers at these establishments must surrender their identity cards while using the internet. Great care was taken by internet users however, to avoid politically sensitive language that would trigger online monitoring by the Mukhabarat. At an internet cafe in Hama in 2009, the city with the most stringent Mukhabarat surveillance, this researcher was told by a young Syrian, "be careful." Government restrictions are not particularly successful however; many Syrians access banned social media sites by using 'proxy' addresses. The internet provides an important tool for evading government restrictions on political discourse. Thus, despite operating in some of the most repressive conditions in the world,[193] Syrian internet users from all communities defied the Asad dynasty's attempts to suppress them and began establishing a 'cyber' civil society based around online forums and discussion groups.[194]

---

[191] 'Syria: Minister of Defense says world lives in "foggy stage" After Bush Administration,' *ISRIA*, France, June 1, 2009, http://www.isria.com/pages/1_June_2009_19.htm.

[192] 'Syria bans Facebook to reclaim Golan Heights,' *Ha'aretz*, Israel, September 15, 2009.

[193] Syria was listed in the top three most repressive countries for 'bloggers', *CNN*, May 2009, 'Myanmar tops list of worst places to be a blogger,' http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TECH/05/04/world.bloggers/.

[194] Anna Skibinsky, 'Syria's Democracy Activist on Moving Toward Peaceful Revolutions,' *The Epoch Times*, August 4, 2009, http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/20484/.

Another communications revolution that the Asad dynasty struggles to control is the proliferation of cellular phones, many of which are internet and digital camera capable. According to official Syrian government figures, thirty eight percent of Syrians had mobile-cellular connections by the end of 2008,[195] which grew to as many as sixty percent by 2011.[196] From my field research in 2009 and 2011, I gained the impression that Syrians of all generations, from all sectarian and socio-economic backgrounds were mostly equipped with mobile phones. It is difficult find to someone without one, whether they be an elderly Alawite tobacco farmer in the Jabal Sahiliyah, or a young shoe polisher crouched in a side alley in Damascus. It seems incredible that many of these people can afford to buy and operate these devices, though this is partially explained by the availability of cheaper Chinese generic brands.[197]

Paradoxically, top regime figures like Rami Makhlouf have profited immensely from the rapid proliferation of cellular phones among Syrians. Makhlouf monopolises the mobile telecommunications industry in Syria with his control of the company 'Syriatel.'[198] It seems then, that one of the main avenues of enrichment for members of the Asad dynasty also facilitated the infrastructure for the revolution that erupted against them in 2011. This provides an interesting variation of Khaldun's theory that "commercial activity on the part of the ruler" leads to a dynasty's decline. [199]

Perhaps the major threat to the Asad dynasty from the communications revolution is the fact that young Alawites are very much involved in it. Internet

---

[195] 'Syria to auction third mobile licence by Q1 2010,' *TeleGeography*, April 17, 2009, http://www.telegeography.com/cu/article.php?article_id=28041&email=html.

[196] UN Data, 'Mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants,' available at, http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=Syria&d=ITU&f=ind1Code%3aI911%3bcountryCode%3aSYR.

[197] By 2007 the Chinese telecommunications company, Huawei, had captured a large share of the Syrian market with its cheap handsets, see: Ben Simpfendorfer, 2009, p.86.

[198] Rami Makhlouf acquired seventy five percent of Syriatel in 2000. This was the procurement that Riad Seif opposed and for which he was jailed in 2001. For details of Syriatel see: Soren Schmidt, 'The Politics of Economic Liberalization in Syria,' *International Development Studies*, Occasional paper, No.25, 2006, p.239.

[199] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, p.232.

and cellular technologies are connecting young Alawites in Latakia to young Sunnis in Hama, or Damascus, or Aleppo. Centuries old misconceptions and suspicions between communities are slowly being broken down. The technological factor may yet prove to be a major element in the demise of Alawite sectarian 'asabiyya, something that Ibn Khaldun could not even have imagined in 1377.

Overview

Outwardly, Bashar al-Asad seemed set to finish the decade triumphantly, having risen above all his external and internal challenges.[200] The Syrian populace, afraid to speak or act openly for fear of arbitrary imprisonment, or even torture, gave no indication that they would soon challenge the authority of the Asad dynasty. Most important to the continuation of Asad rule were the Alawites. Despite having their religion and identity submerged and being increasingly neglected by the regime elite, the community, with the exception of glimpses of liberal dissent among Alawite youth and a few Alawite intellectuals, remained broadly loyal to the Asad dynasty.

While Alawites clung to Asad rule, under the surface, rumblings of civil unrest in Syria steadily increased due to socio-economic, environmental, religious and political discontentment. The potential for revolution in Syria was assisted by new communication technologies, which provided a novel vehicle for political dissent. These developments provided both threats and opportunities for the Alawite community. The resilience of sectarian 'asabiyya could cause Alawites to stay strongly supportive of the Asad dynasty, even as it moved towards a dangerous decline. This could lead to the Alawite community jointly suffering negative consequences if the Asad dynasty collapsed. On the other hand, Syria's overwhelming youthful population, willing and increasingly capable of engaging

[200] See for example: 'Syria: Has it won?' *The Economist*, Nov 26th 2009; Ayman Abdel Nour, 'Syria's season of clout,' *Gulf News*, UAE, October 9, 2009.

in cross sectarian political dialogue, provided, possibly, a final opportunity for Alawites to overcome sectarian insecurity and become intgrated in Syrian society. Ibn Khaldun observed, quite reasonably, that "every dynasty has an expiry date."[201] Whether the Asad dynasty's expiration arrived sooner or later, it would no doubt come. What fate would befall the Alawite community when that moment arrived remained in the balance.

[201] Ibn Khaldun wrote: "as a rule no dynasty lasts beyond three generations," *The Muqaddimah*, p. 136.

Conclusion

The Challenge to Overcome Sectarian Insecurity: The End of ‘Asabiyya?

Shaykh Qasim al-Tabarani led the Alawites into the inhospitable Jabal Sahiliyah sometime after 1008 due to religious persecution and intolerance. A thousand years later, on December 12, 2009, the core members of the Asad family, Bashar, Maher, and Bushra gathered in Qurdaha for the funeral of their brother, Majd.[1] A few days later another funeral took place. Former president Amin Hafiz, the last living person to rule Syria who was not an Asad died in Damascus aged eighty-nine.[2] The dynasty established by Hafiz al-Asad had ruled Syria for forty years.

It was the ‘asabiyya of the Alawites that allowed for the establishment, consolidation and, most importantly, the durability of the Asad dynasty. Ibn Khaldun’s theory suggested that Alawite ‘asabiyya should have declined through the next stage of the Asad dynasty, yet it did not. There is, therefore, a need to adjust Khaldunian theory to include sectarian identity and, in particular, sectarian insecurity as a factor in the maintenance of group ‘asabiyya. This has been shown clearly in this study.

The implications of resilient sectarian ‘asabiyya have great relevance to the current Syrian uprising but also to the maintenance of authoritarian rule in the Middle East and elsewhere. Bahrain’s Al-Khalifa regime is arguably upheld by the sectarian ‘asabiyya of the Sunni minority. Likewise there may be scope to compare the relative levels of ‘asabiyya and insecurity of ethnic groups like, for example, the Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda. Even in Western democracies there is scope to

[1] ‘Syrian president's younger brother dies,’ *Press TV*, Tehran, December 12, 2009, http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=113584&sectionid=351020206.

[2] ‘Former Syrian President Amin Hafez dies at 89,’ *Associated Press*, Damascus, December 17, 2009, http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hi0ikWWKplSnbywIWE1AYfozlE3gD9CL9LU05; With the exception of Abd al-Halim Khaddam’s very short caretaker role in 2000.

analyse long term political effects of 'group feeling' from a Khaldunian perspective, for example, Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand.

It seemed remarkable that a member of one of the most despised minorities in the Middle East could establish a dynasty at the very heart of the Sunni dominated Middle East. Yet, the fourteenth-century thinker Ibn Khaldun has provided an explanation for how it was possible. This shows that Ibn Khaldun is a relevant theorist for understanding today's world. The case of the Alawites has confirmed and, by demonstrating the influence of sectarian insecurity, extended Ghassan Salame's hypothesis that the "weak" authoritarian states of the Middle East have in a Khaldunian sense suffered from the difficulty of transferring "loyalty from the traditional group to the modern state."[3] Admittedly, there are limitations in using Ibn Khaldun's ideas to explain broader strategic, economic and geopolitical processes as William Harris has pointed out.[4] Nonetheless, by adjusting Ibn Khaldun's political theory to include sectarian identity it could be a valuable tool for explaining the shifting political dynamics of the contemporary Middle East.

This is not to say that sectarianism is an indivisible component of Middle East politics. For instance, the Asad dynasty, while made possible by Alawites, is not an Alawite regime but rather a "self-reproducing and narrow elite" who have benefited from Alawite 'asabiyya, made resilient by sectarian insecurity.[5] By definition an 'Alawite regime' would entail a regime that benefits Alawites. As this study has shown this is not the case for the great majority of Alawites whose only benefit from the Asad regime has possibly been a misplaced sense of security. Considerable efforts were made by Alawites, Sunnis and the other minorities to achieve genuine political integration in Syria after independence.

[3] Ghassan Salame, 'Strong' and 'Weak' States, a Qualified Return to the Muqaddimah, in G. Salame (ed.) *The Foundations of the Arab State*, Vol. 1, (New York: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 223.

[4] Harris, William, *The Levant, A Fractured Mosaic*, (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2003). p. 58.

[5] Volker Perthes, (ed.) *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change* (Boulder: Lynne Riener, 2004), p. 110.

Without the influence of sectarian insecurity the results may have been more positive.

So how exactly has Ibn Khaldun helped explain Alawite history and the rise of the Asad dynasty? It was necessary to examine how the Alawites developed high levels of ‘asabiyya in the first place. The main cause was most certainly their consistent persecution and discrimination at the hands of Sunni Muslims. This was the case in Iraq, Syria and in their mountain refuge, the Jabal Sahiliyah. Another factor was the community’s transition to a rural, tribal society, which was a direct result of their marginalisation. Isolated in their mountain refuge for centuries, the Alawites became self reliant and “wild,” which Ibn Khaldun equated to high levels of ‘asabiyya. However, the fractured topography of the Jabal Sahiliyah, intertribal fighting and interference by external powers prevented the development of a broad sectarian ‘asabiyya for many centuries. Essentially, and not of their choosing, the Alawites were ostracised from the Muslim world of which they were originally a part and then gradually developed their own strong identity that would later become politically relevant when they eventually tried to re-enter mainstream Muslim society.

In short, Khaldun can help identify the characteristics of the Alawite community that equate with high levels of ‘asabiyya and, therefore, makes their political rise fathomable. However, his theories do not provide much explanation for how these characteristics came about. His neglect of questions of sectarianism also failed to consider questions of persecution in the development of group feeling. This was likely due to the relative homogeneity of Islam by his time, however, the resilience of the Fatamid Shi’a Ismaili dynasty of Egypt of the tenth to twelfth centuries surely came within his historical purview.

As the Ottoman Empire declined and modern Syria emerged, Alawite ‘asabiyya played an important role in the development of the state. Political flux provided favourable conditions for Alawite individuals to establish their superiority and mobilise Alawite ‘asabiyya. With Ottoman authority lacking,

Ismail Khayr Bey achieved political significance, however, his career was curtailed when central authority resumed as a result of wider strategic and geopolitical factors. This supports William Harris' argument about the limited utility of Ibn Khaldun's theory.

Hafiz al-Asad's rise was, however, a genuinely Khaldunian process but it came within a quite different geopolitical context. Within the truncated Syrian sovereign state the Alawites' political significance was amplified. Alawite significance was made even more salient when viewed in the context of their high 'asabiyya; thus, when Hafiz al-Asad consolidated his superiority among the Alawites he was able to dominate the Syrian state.

Once again it must be emphasised that sectarianism was not the initial impulse of those groups and individuals who were trying to build a diverse independent state; however, a type of ethno-religious security dilemma occurred between communities as they struggled to come to terms with a fluid political arena and their centuries-old sectarian insecurities. The Alawites had more cause for insecurity than most, having been at the receiving end of Sunni discrimination their whole history, which explains why they clung to the Asad regime and its upholding of Ba'athist secular ideology. Hafiz al-Asad remained firmly rooted in his Alawite community and his careful pragmatism buttressed his stature with Alawites. He provided at least some benefit to the entire Alawite community and presided over a relatively inclusive patronage system that resembled Ibn Khaldun's model of a dynasty in its first stage. The Muslim Brotherhood assault from 1976 to 1982 and the massacre at Hama changed the situation completely. The politics of sectarian insecurity became the only factor in Syrian politics and brutal, Alawite enforced, repression descended on Syria.

Ibn Khaldun's theories begin to falter as an explanation for the continuation of high Alawite 'asabiyya into the second stage of the dynasty. From 2000, the political behaviour of the Alawites can increasingly be explained only as a result of sectarian insecurity. While Alawites expected a dynastic succession to continue

the socio-economic security and egalitarianism they had experienced under Hafiz al-Asad, downward pressure soon came to bear on Alawite 'asabiyya. This occured as a result of Bashar al-Asad's lesser understanding of Alawite interests and the importance of preserving their support. The economic policies he implemented were unpopular among ordinary Alawites, especially as wide disparities in wealth developed between individuals close to the regime and the bulk of the Alawite community. Basic infrastructural and socio-economic advances for Alawites, achieved under Hafiz al-Asad, stalled or even regressed. Moreover, the 'corporatisation of corruption' in this period, resembled Ibn Khaldun's portrayal of a ruler who engages in commerce to the detriment of his citizens; a symptom of a dynasty in decline.

In terms of statecraft, Bashar al-Asad lacked the careful pragmatism of his father. This was most evident in foreign policy, where, following some serious miscalculations based on poor judgement and the influence of close advisors, Bashar brought almost the entire international community down upon the regime. As the regime came under pressure, Bashar al-Asad allowed his external allies, Iran and Hizballah, to become increasingly dominant in their relations with Syria. This reflected Ibn Khaldun's prediction that a declining dynasty will become increasingly reliant on supporters outside its group.

All the factors that Ibn Khaldun prescribed for a rapid decline in 'asabiyya were therefore present in the first decade of Bashar al-Asad's rule; however, the politics of sectarian insecurity prevented any real reduction in Alawite support to the regime. This was partly due to Bashar al-Asad's calculated perpetuation of Alawite sectarian paranoia, which was reinforced by sectarian chaos in Iraq and Lebanon.

Overall, Ibn Khaldun can explain the full course of Alawite political history but only by the inclusion of sectarian 'asabiyya as way to explain the resilience of Alawite support to the Asad regime. The politics of sectarian insecurity embraces the causes and effects of insecurity between religious communities. The causes of

insecurity are deeply rooted in the history of the Alawite sect. The effects of Alawite insecurity enabled the establishment and consolidation of the authoritarian Asad dynasty; however, the ultimate effect of Alawite insecurity could well be civil war in Syria.

As the intended research period of this work ended in late 2010, it seemed that the Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun's theory for the decline of 'asabiyya in groups would, in Syria's case, fail to manifest into the rapid decline of the Asad dynasty. The resilience of Alawite sectarian insecurity appeared to ensure the continuation of Asad rule into the foreseeable future at least. Then on December 17, 2010, another Tunisian, the street vendor Muhammad Bouazizi, in an expression of sheer frustration, set himself on fire to protest corruption and injustice in his country.[6] The incident ignited smouldering Arab discontent and was transmitted rapidly and widely in the Arab world by modern communications technologies and social media. Starting in Tunisia, Bouazizi's act caused a wave of Arab uprisings that, despite Bashar al-Asad's pronounced belief in his own popularity,[7] cascaded into southern Syria on March 15, 2011. From the very first day, Syrian protesters tried to reassure Alawites of their security. A voice in the background of a 'You Tube' video posted to the internet said: "The date is March 15 [...] this is the first open uprising against the Syrian regime [...] Alawite or Sunni, all kinds of Syrians; we want to bring the regime down!" [8] Ten days later anti-regime protests broke out in the 'Alawite city' and regime stronghold, Latakia.

For loyal Alawites these events instantly changed the political landscape, forcing them to confront the reality of their relationship with the Asad dynasty. The challenge for the Syrian Alawite community was whether they could

---

[6] 'Street seller's death sets off mass revolt,' *The Financial Times*, January 17, 2011.

[7] See, 'Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad,' *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011.

[8] 'Rare protest quashed in Syria,' *al-Jazeera*, Doha, March 16, 2011, http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011316131236735771.html.

overcome their sectarian insecurity and abandon the Asad dynasty. This struggle within the Alawite community was ongoing at the time of this writing. There were already signs of a possible peeling away from the regime. In a fashion reminiscent of the pragmatic Alawite approach of 1936, rumours circulated in late June, 2011 that Alawite religious leaders had already approached Sunni Imams seeking guarantees of Alawite security 'in return for abandoning the Asads.'[9] And in September 2011, four prominent Alawite shaykhs, Mohib Nisafi, Yassin Hussein and Mussa Mansour, denounced the killing of civilian protesters and tried to distance the Alawite community from the regime; stating: "We declare our innocence from these atrocities carried out by Bashar al-Assad and his aides who belong to all religious sects."[10] In addition, long silent Alawite liberals like Aref Dalila and Louay Hussein again emerged to try and bridge the gap between the Alawite and Sunni communities in Syria.[11] More Alawites may yet take pragmatic steps to separate themselves from blame for the atrocities of the Asad regime.

Regardless of the outcome of the Syrian revolution there will a new political reality in Syria sooner or later. It is quite possible that in a fluid political environment a 'security dilemma' between communities will set off another Khaldunian cycle. It could well be that the group with the highest level of 'asabiyya, sectarian or otherwise, could give rise to another authoritarian dynasty. This is the dilemma facing all the transforming Arab states. For instance, the emergence of a tribal 'asabiyya in Libya, a Kurdish 'asabiyya in Iraq or a tribal-sectarian 'asabiyya in Yemen, are all within the bounds of possibility.

So what are possible answers to the problems of social integration in the Middle East? Arendt Lijphart says that "consociationalism is [...] the only realistic

---

[9] 'The Squeeze on Asad,' *Economist*, anonymous correspondent, June 30, 2011.

[10] 'Prominent Alawite clerics denounce Assad regime's 'atrocities,' *Al-Arabiya*, Dubai, September 12, 2011, http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/12/166498.html.

[11] 'Syrian opposition figure triggers debate,' Rula Amin, *Al-Jazeera*, July 11, 2011; 'Profiles: Syrian opposition figures,' *Al-Jazeera*, June 27, 2011.

possibility [for] ethnically and religiously divided societies."[12] In reply, Donald Horowitz has argued that "there is a circularity of cause and effect in consociational theory, and its application to the more severely divided societies of Asia and Africa remains problematic."[13] In other words, organising politics along ethno-religious lines can only lead to the reification of distinct identities and eventually back to conflict. The Lebanese state is the archetypal case showing the dangers inherent in a power sharing system based on institutionalised sectarianism. While its citizens have in general enjoyed greater liberty than in most Middle Eastern states, competition and insecurity between politically mobilised communities has caused catastrophic violence and frequent paralysis in the functioning of the state. Yet, as the case of Syria has shown, completely suppressing religious identity has only been possible through suffocating political repression.

The answer to the question of a new model of political integration is perhaps to be found with the Alawites themselves. The Alawites' experience of coping with tenuous security throughout their history, their syncretistic religion incorporating elements from several religious traditions, and their historic aptitude for pragmatism, qualifies the Alawites as a source of knowledge about political integration. Alawite political preferences have generally been dictated by pragmatic goals of achieving communal security rather than any fundamental ideology or political philosophy. Their politics, therefore, often seem contradictory, such as the apparent centrality of Alawite "primordial loyalties" to the upholding of a radically secular Ba'athist regime,[14] or the Alawite desire to join the diverse Lebanese confessional democracy in 1936, compared with their eventual adoption of homogenous Arab nationalist ideology.

---

[12] Arend Lijphart, *Thinking about Democracy* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), p. 279.

[13] Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.), p. 570-576.

[14] Van Dam, 2011, p. 144.

The Alawite State was essentially consociational in its design, allocating seats in the representative council proportionate to the various communities. However, the design and operation of the Alawite state was essentially an artificial innovation of the French, who deliberately sought to emphasize sectarian divisions. Whether or not the Alawites would genuinely have preferred secluded autonomy in their territory in North-West Syria is also a moot point as their lack of genuine viable options left them little choice but to make a pragmatic compromise to commit to the Sunni dominated Syrian state.

When the more localised Syrian nationalism of the SSNP was terminated, the radical Arab secularism of the Ba'ath Party became the best remaining option for Alawites. Consequently, the sect became submerged as a distinct community, which likely reassured their fears of Sunni intolerance. But do Alawites really prefer not being able to openly assume their religious identity? Alawite political preferences seem based on three key principles: security, equality and diversity. This was plainly evident from Alawite community leaders spoken to by this author. For example, in March 2011, the Alawite shaykh Muhammad Boz told this author:

> We don't have any divergence or hatred, we believe in God the merciful who created all mankind. If He wanted He would have created all men Christian or Jews or Alawites [...] But God wanted diversity. 'This one is Alawite, this one is Jew, and another one is Christian.' We accept all this and we don't make may difference [between religions].[15]

To the Alawites diversity is the ideal condition, it is what 'God intended.' This contradicts the principles of Ba'athism that seeks to homogenise citizens into a single Arab polity to the exclusion of all other forms of identity. Further

[15] Shaykh Muhammad Boz, Interview with the author, March 28, Antakya.

illuminating Alawite perspectives, the Antakya shaykh ʻAli Yeral articulated his ideal political environment:

> Democracy benefits all the people; this means that it benefits the Alawites, the Sunni, the Christians and the Jews [...] They will be able to express themselves, they will for example say, 'I am not subscribing to Bashar al-Asad's politics, however, I will not betray my nation [by saying this].' I will not strike and kill when I have a different point of view and you also can have a different point of view. [16]

ʻAli Yeral portrayed a liberal democratic political environment with freedom of expression and religious identity. This view also differs from the standard model of Ba'athist conformity to the aspirations of the masses and the unity of the nation. Neither does the ideal Alawite political model seem to be for a consociational system but rather a system that enshrines strict equality in citizenship, which is an understandable priority for the long discriminated against community.

Alawites do not necessarily desire an ethno-religiously based state either. In regard to the possibility of another state along the lines of the Alawite State of 1922-1936, Shaykh ʻAli Yeral said:

> We don't want and we don't think about dividing Syria [...]Let it be one united country[...]I don't think Syria will be divided, for example, Latakia and its suburbs for the Alawites [and] the east of Syria for the Sunnis. [17]

This view which was echoed by the Alawite opposition activist and member of the Syrian National Council, Monzer Makhouz:

[16] Shaykh ʻAli Yeral, interview with author, March 28, 2011, Antakya.

[17] Ibid.

> I cannot deny that some lunatics want to have an independent Alawite state but they are very few and they don't realize that such a plan will not only destroy Syria but also the Alawites themselves.[18]

Overall, in seeking a solution to end the Khaldunian cycle of politics perpetuated by sectarian insecurity, the answer may not be a consociational, power sharing arrangement that could reify political-sectarian identities, a radically secular regime that represses any suggestion of sectarian identity, or a ethno-religiously based polity, but perhaps a truly pluralist state that openly recognises diversity in the context of equal citizenship. In order to suppress the re-emergence of sectarian insecurity, restrictions on religious discrimination, intolerance or fundamentalism would need to be enshrined in the constitutional foundations of the state. Religion is an integral aspect of Middle East culture and it will always be that way, therefore, consideration must be given to how it can be accommodated in a new Middle Eastern political paradigm.

The key to preventing a recurrence of Khaldunian politics is to actively foster the security of all groups in a state. The case of the Syrian Alawites has shown that Ibn Khaldun's theory of a 'cyclical' rise and decline of dynasties is not an unavoidable component of Middle East politics. Khaldunian politics are the product of negative aspects of human behaviour which include on one side intolerance and discrimination and on the other, fear and insecurity. Under the right political conditions these aspects of human behaviour can be prevented, or mitigated, regardless of the cultural context. The question of how best to foster these conditions in the Middle East is a subject requiring wide-ranging research.

Meanwhile, on that afternoon in Latakia on March 25, 2011, my Alawite friend rushed back to his army unit in Damascus with the fate of his community and Syria in his hands. Would Alawites like him, pragmatically accept the demise of the Asad dynasty and take a leap of faith to join with the Syrian majority? Or

[18] 'Syrian Alawites hate Assad: opposition figure,' *Al-Arabia*, December 20, 2011.

would the sectarian insecurity dimension of Alawite ‘asabiyya keep them clinging to the Asad dynasty as it violently struggles to regain control? Over a year into the uprising there is an impasse between the Asad dynasty’s stated willingness to drag the Alawites, Syria and the Middle East down into civil war if it continues to challenged,[19] and the oppositions’ determination that there is no turning back.[20] Ordinary Alawites are caught in the middle of this deadly conflict. The only escape for the community is to find a way to overcome their sectarian insecurity, abandon the Asad dynasty and seek reconciliation with the Sunni community. There remains a chance for a diverse, truly pluralist Syria to emerge if the politics of insecurity, which gave rise to and sustained the Asad dynasty, can be transformed into the politics of reconciliation and integration.

[19] Anthony Shadid, ‘Ally of Assad says Syria will Fight Protests till the End,’ *New York Times*, May 10, 2011.

[20] Rania Abouzeid, ‘Syria Ceasefire Holds and the Protests Start Up Again,’ *Time World*, April 13, 2012.

Bibliography

Primary sources – Arabic

Al-'Awra, Ibrahim, *Tarikh Waliyat Suleiman Pasha al-'Adil, 1804-1819*, pp. 205-206, translated by the author and Jean-Luc Payan, 2010.

Al-Ibrahim, 'Ali 'Aziz, *Al-Alawiyyun wa al-Shi'a,* Beirut: 1992.

Al-Qila'i, Ibn Jibrail, *Zajaliyyat*, Beirut: Dar Lahad Khatar, 1982.

Haqqi, Ismail, *Lubnan: Mabahith Ilmiya wa Ijtima'iya,* ed. Fuad Bustani from the 1918 original, 2 vols. Beirut: Manshurat al-Jami'at al-Lubnaniyya, Qism al-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyya, 1970.

Primary sources – English

BP Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2011.

Decree of the High Commissioner of the French Republic,' *League of Nations Official Journal*, September 1930, No.3113, p. 1124.

IMF Country Report No. 07/288, August 2007.

IMF Country Report, No. 10/86, March, 2010.

King, Henry C. and Crane, Charles R., 'Wishes of the people,' *The King-Crane Commission Report* — Confidential Appendix— August 28, 1919. V. 55, No. 27, 2nd Section, December 2, 1922, I. II. 2.

League of Nations Official Journal, 93rd and 94th Sessions of the Council, Annex 1622, November 1936, p. 1354.

League of Nations Official Journal, 104th Session of the Council, Annex 1742, February 1939, p. 162.

'Letter from the French Government to the Secretary General of the League of Nations,' Paris, June 11th, 1930, *League of Nations Official Journal*, September 1930, Article 18, p. 1100.

'Observations of the Administration of Certain Territories under Mandate,' *League of Nations Official Journal*, 104th Session of the Council, Annex 1742, February 1939, A. pp. 161-162.

'The Mandate' July 24th 1922,' *League of Nations Official Journal*, 95th Session of the Council, Annex 1629 January 1937, Article 8, p. 47.

UNDP, 'The Impact of the World Economic Downturn on Syrian Economy, Inequality and Poverty,' November 3, 2009, available at: http://www.undp.org/content/dam/aplaws/publication/en/publications/poverty-reduction/poverty-website/psia/syria-full-report/The_Impact_of_the_World_Crisis_Revised_Version%20SYRIA.pdf

UNIIIC, 'Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission,' Detlev Mehlis, Beirut, October 19, 2005, document available at: http://www.un.org/news/dh/docs/mehlisreport.pdf (accessed July 28, 2009).

United Nations, Official U.N. transcript of the meeting of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon with Bashar al-Asad. Damascus, 24 April 2007.

UN Security Council, S/RES/1559 (2004) 04-49892 (E), adopted, September 2, 2004,

UN Security Council, S/RES/1595 (2005), 05-29998(E), adopted April 7, 2005.

UN Security Council, S/RES/1686 (2006), 06-39006 (E), adopted June 15, 2006.

UN Security Council, S/RES/1701 (2006), 06-46503 (E), adopted August 11, 2006.

UN Security Council, S/RES/1757 (2007), 07-36357 (E), adopted, May 30, 2007.

(All UN Security Council Resolutions, available at: http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/)

US Embassy Cable, SECRET SECTION 01 of 02 DAMASCUS 000541, August 3, 2008, (Wiki leaks) available at, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/164634 (accessed August 12, 2009).

US Energy Information Administration, 'Syria Analysis,' http://205.254.135.7/countries/cab.cfm?fips=SY

World Bank http://data.worldbank.org/country/syrian-arab-republic

Personal Interviews

Abd al-Halim Khaddam, September 16, 2009, Paris.

Judge Detlev Mehlis, May 12, 2009, Dunedin.

Professor Elie Salam, March 16, 2011, Balamand.

Shaykh 'Ali Yeral, March 28, 2011, Antakya (in Arabic).

Shaykh Muhammad Boz, March 28, 2011, Antakya (in Arabic).

Shaykh Nasir Eskiocak, March 29, 2011, Antakya (in Arabic).

Newspapers, news websites and magazines

Agence France-Presse, daily, Paris.

Al-Hayat, daily, London.

Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, daily, London.

BBC News, UK, news website, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/

Financial Times, daily, London.

Ha'aretz, daily, Tel Aviv.

Institute of War and Peace Reporting, UK, news website, http://iwpr.net/

Jerusalem Post, daily, Jerusalem.

Los Angeles Times, daily, Los Angeles

Naharnet, Beirut, news website, http://www.naharnet.com

New York Times, daily, New York.

Press TV, Tehran, news website, http://www.presstv.ir/

Syrian Arab News Agency, Damascus, news website, http://www.sana.sy/index_eng.html

Syria Today, monthly, Damascus.

The Daily Star, daily, Beirut.

The Economist, weekly, London.

The Times, daily, London.

Washington Post, daily, Washington DC.

Xinhua, China, news website, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english2010/

Secondary Sources

Abir, M. 'Modernisation, reaction and Muhammad Ali's Empire,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Oct., 1977).

Abboud, Samer, 'The Transition Paradigm and the Case of Syria,' in Hinnebusch R. (ed.) *Syria's Economy and the Transition Paradigm*, University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

Abdallah, Umar F. *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983.

Abdulghanim, Jasim, *Iraq and Iran, the Crisis Years*, Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984.

Agoston G. and Masters, B. *Encyclopaedia of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Infobase, 2009.

Ahmad, Z. *The Epistemology of Ibn Khaldun*, London: Routledge-Curzon, 2003.

Amitai, R. 'Ayn Jālūt revisited,' Tarih 2. Philadelphia, IX, *The Mongols in Islamic Lands*, Aldershot: Ashgate/Valorium, 2007.

Andrew, C. and Kanya-Forstner, A. S. *The Climax of French Imperial Expansion 1914-1924*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1981.

Al-Azmeh, A. *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship, A Study in Orientalism*, London: Third World Research Centre, 1981.

———*Ibn Khaldun: An Essay in Reinterpretation*, Budapest: Central European Press, 2003.

Al-Bitar, Salah al-Din, Interview with M. Aulas, translated by M. Hooglund, E. & Paul, J. 'The Major Deviation of the Ba'th Is Having Renounced Democracy,' *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982).

Al-Tawīl, Muhammad Amīn Ghālib, *Ta'rīkh al-'Alawiyyīn*, Latakia: 1966.

Arslanian, Ferdinand, 'Growth in Transition and Syria's Economic Performance,' in Hinnebusch, R. (ed.) *Syria's Economy and the Transition Paradigm*, University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

Ashworth, L.M. "Ibn Khaldun and the Origins of State Politics," in Persram, N. (ed.) *Postcolonialism and Political Theory*, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007.

Avi-Ran, Reuben, *The Syrian Involvement in Lebanon Since 1975*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1991.

Badran, Tony, 'Divided They Stand: The Syrian Opposition,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (September-October, 2006).

Bar, Shmuel, 'Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview,' *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 25 (2006), pp.353-445.

Bar-Asher, Meir M. 'The Iranian Component of the Nusayrī Religion,' *Iran*, Vol. 4 (2003), pp. 217-227.

Bar-Asher, Meir M. and Kofksy, Aryeh, *The Nusayri-'Alawī Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy*, Leiden: Brill, 2002.

Barbour, Nevill, 'Impressions of the United Arab Republic,' *International Affairs,* Vol. 36, No. 1 (Jan., 1960), pp. 21-34.

Batatu, Hanna, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), pp. 331-344.

———'Syria's Muslim Brethren,' *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), pp. 12-20+34+36.

———*Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Be'eri, Eliezer, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969.

Bengio, Ofra, & Ben-Dor, Gabriel, eds. *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, Boulder: Lynne Riener, 1999.

Berkey, J.P. *The Formation Of Islam, Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Biddle, S. & Friedman, J.A. '*The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and The Future Of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, September 2008, Strategic Studies Institute**.**

Bou-Nacklie, N.E. 'Les Troupes Speciales: Religious and Ethnic Recruitment, 1916-46,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1993), pp. 545-660.

———'The 1941 Invasion of Syria and Lebanon: The Role of the Local Paramilitary,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (July 1994).

Bosworth, Clifford E. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*: Supplement, Vol. 12, Leiden: Brill, 1980.

Dadlder, Ivo H. & Stavridis, James G., 'NATO's Victory in Libya,' *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2012), Vol. 91, Issue 2.

Cardinal, Monique, C. 'Religious education in Syria: unity and difference,' *British Journal of Religious Education* Vol. 31, No. 2, March 2009, 91–101.

Chalcroft, John, The *Invisible Cage, Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Cohen, S.B. *Geopolitics: the Geography of International Relations*, 2nd edition, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.

Cox, K.R.; Low, M. & Robinson, J. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Political Geography*, London: Sage Publications, 2008.

Davis, Eric, 'Pensée 3: A Sectarian Middle East?' *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* vol.40, no.4 (November 2008), pp. 555-558,

De Planhol, Xavier, *The World of Islam*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1959.

——— *Minorités En Islam*, *Géographie Politique et Sociale*, Paris: Flammarion, 2007.

Dib, Kamal, *Warlords and Merchants: The Lebanese Business and Political Establishment*, Reading: Ithaca, 2004.

Dhillon, Navtej & Yousef, Tarik, (eds.) *Generation in Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East*, Washington: Brookings Institution, 2009.

Doğruel, Fulya & Leman, Johan, 'Conduct' and Counter-conduct on the Southern Border of Turkey: Multicultural Antakya,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (July 2009), pp. 593–610.

Dostal, Jörg, Michael, 'The European Union and Economic Reform in Syria,' in Hinnebusch, R. (ed.) *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Relationship*, University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

Douwes, Dick, *The Ottomans in Syria, A History of Justice and Oppression*, London: I.B. Taurus, 2000.

Drysdale, Alasdair, 'The Asad Regime and Its Troubles,' *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), pp. 3-11+36.

——— 'The Syrian Political Elite, 1966-76: A Spatial and Social Analysis,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (1981b), pp. 3-31.

Dueck, Jennifer, M. '*Educational Conquest: Schools as a Sphere of Politics in French Mandate Syria, 1936 – 1946*,' Oxford University Press, 2006.

Dussaud, Rene, *Histoire et Religion des Nosairies*, Paris: Bouillon, 1900.

Eid, Abdulrazak, 'The Syrian Regime: the Impossibility of Reformation,' paper presented at the Hudson Institute, Washington, March 26, 2009.

Eisner, Elliot W., *The Enlightened Eye, Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998.

Emadi, H. *Politics of the Dispossessed, Superpowers and Developments in the Middle East*, Westport: Praeger, 2001.

Faksh, Mahmud, A. 'The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April 1984), pp. 133-153.

Fearon, James, Kasara, Kimuli. & Laitin, David, 'Ethnic Minority Rule and Civil War Onset,' *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (February 2007).

Firro, Kais, M. 'The 'Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nusayrīya to Islam via 'Alawīya,' *Der Islam*, Vol. 82, no. 1 (2005), pp 1-31.

Fetcher, Rev. J.P., *Notes from Nineveh, and Travels in Mesopotamia, Assyria, and Syria,* Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1850.

Fox, J. "Is Islam More Conflict Prone than Other Religions? A Cross-Sectional Study of Ethnoreligious Conflict," *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (summer 2000), pp. 1-24.

Frank, R.H. & Bernanke, B. S. (eds.) *Principles of Economics,* 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2007.

Friedman, Yaron, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Fatwa against the Nusayri-Alawi Sect,' *Der Islam,* Vol. 82, No. 2 (2005).

———*The Nusayrī -'Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Freitag, Ulrike, 'Historical Correctness: The Ba'th Party in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Jan, 1999), pp. 1-16.

Fromherz, Allen, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Gambill, Gary C., 'The Mysterious Downfall of Assef Shawkat,' *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.3, No.2 (August 2008).

Gauthier, Julie, 'The 2004 Events in al-Qamishli: Has the Kurdish question erupted in Syria,' in Fred Lawson (ed.) *Demystifying Syria*, London: Saqi, 2009.

George, Alan, *Syria, Neither Bread Nor Freedom*, London & New York: Zed Books, 2003.

Ghadban, Najib, Book Review, *Journal of Arab Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Oct 31, 1991).

Ghadry, Farid, 'Syrian Reform: What Lies Beneath,' *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter, 2005), pp. 61-70.

Gellner, E. *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

Goodarzi, Jubin, M. *Syria and Iran, Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, London & New York: Taurus, 2006.

Gotlieb, Y. *Self-Determination in the Middle East*, New York: Praeger, 1982.

Hall, J.A. & Trentmann, F. (eds.) *Civil Society: A Reader in History, Theory and Global Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Halliday, F. *Nation and Religion in the Middle East*, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000

Halm, Heinz, *The Arabs, A Short History*, Translated by Brown, A.,& Lampert, T., Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2007.

Harik, Iliya F. 'The Ethnic Revolution and Political Integration in the Middle East,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (July, 1972), pp. 303-323,

Harris, William, *The Levant, A Fractured Mosaic*, Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2003.

——— 'Crisis in the Levant: Lebanon at Risk,' *Mediterranean Quarterly* Vol. 18, No. 2 (August 16, 2007), pp. 37-60.

——— *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, Chapter 5 in draft manuscript, New York: Oxford University Press (forthcoming in 2012).

Haugbolle, S. "Imprisonment, Truth Telling and Historical Memory in Syria," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (July 2008), pp. 261-276.

Helfont, Samuel, 'The Muslim Brotherhood and the Emerging 'Shia Crescent' *Orbis*, Vol.53, Issue.2 (Spring 2009), pp. 284-299.

Hinnebusch, Raymond and Quilliam, Neil, 'Contrary Siblings: Syria, Jordan and the Iraq War', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (September 2006), pp. 513-528.

Horowitz, Donald L., *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Hourani, Albert, 'Middle Eastern Studies Today,' *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)* Vol. 11, No. 2 (1984), pp. 111-120.

———'Islam and the Philosophers of History,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (April, 1967), pp. 206-268.

——— *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East*, London: Macmillan, 1981.

——— *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay*, London: Oxford University Press, 1946.

Ilsley, Omar, 'Syria: Hama Massacre,' in Heribert, A. (ed.) *Hushed Voices, Unacknowledged Atrocities of the 20th Century,* Berkshire Academic Press, 2011.

Imber, Colin, *The Ottoman Empire 1300-1650: The Structure of Power*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002.

Irwin, Robert, 'Toynbee and Ibn Khaldun,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (July, 1997), pp. 461-479.

Iskandar, Marwan, *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon*, London: Saqi, 2006.

Jabar, F. A. & Dawood, H. (eds.) *Tribes and Power, Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, London: Saqi, 2003.

Jenkins, Philip, *The Lost History of Christianity*, New York: Harper Collins, 2008.

Jessup, Reverend Henry H., *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, London: Fleming H. Revell, 1910

Kaplan, Robert, 'The Revenge of Geography,' *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2009)

Kanovsky, Eliyahu, 'Will Arab-Israel Peace Bring Prosperity?' *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 1994).

Kaylani, Nabil, M. 'The Rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940-1958: Political Success, Party Failure,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue. 1 (January 1972), pp. 3-23.

Kedar, Mordechai, *Asad in Search of Legitimacy: Message and Rhetoric in the Syrian Press under Hafiz and Bashar*, United Kingdom: Sussex University Press, 2005.

Kerr, Malcolm, 'Hafiz Asad and the Changing Patterns of Syrian Politics,' *International Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Summer 1973), pp. 689-706.

Khaldun, Ibn. *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, trans. Rosenthal, F. abr., Dawood, N.J. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967.

Khandil, Hazem 'The Challenge of Restructuring: Syrian Foreign Policy,' in Korany B. & Dessoukip, A.E.H. (eds.) *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, Cairo: AUC Press, 2009.

Al-Khazen, Farid, 'Kamal Jumblatt, the Uncrowned Druze Prince of the Left,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Apr., 1988), pp. 178-205.

Khoury, Philip, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945*, London: I.B. Taurus Books, 1987.

Khuri, Fuad, *Imams and Emirs, State, Religion and Sects in Islam*, London: Saqi Books, 1990.

Lawson, Fred (ed.) *Demystifying Syria*, London: Saqi, 2009.

Lacoste, Yves, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of Third World*, London: Verso, 1984.

Lesch, David, *The New Lion of Damascus*: *Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

———"Syrian Arab Republic," in Long, D.E., Reich, B. & Gasiorowski, M. (eds.) *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 5th ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 2007, pp. 259-291.

Leverett, Flynt, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 2005.

Lijphart, Arend, *Thinking about Democracy*, Oxon: Routledge, 2008.

Longrigg, Stephen H., *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

Lyde, Rev. Samuel, *The Asian Mystery Illustrated in the History, Religion, and Present State of The Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria*, London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1860.

Mahdi, Muhsin, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1957.

Mahfouda, Robert F., Beck, James N., 'Petrographic/geochemical studies of primary and alteration–weathering minerals in garnetiferous ultramafic xenoliths–basanite, Tartous Province, NW Syria,' *Microchemical Journal,* Vol. 78 (2004), pp. 115-126.

Maoz, Moshe, *Syria and Israel, From War to Peace-making*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

——— & Pappe, Ilan (eds.) *Middle Eastern Politics and Ideas: A History from Within*, London: Taurus, 1997.

Mardem-Bey, S., *Syria's Quest for Independence 1939-1945*, Beirut: Ithaca, 1994.

Martin, Kevin, W. 'Peasants into Syrians,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 41, 2009.

Martines, Lauro, *April Blood: Florence and the Plot against the Medici*, London: Pimlico, 2004.

Masters, B. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World, The Roots of Sectarianism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Maundrell, Henry, *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem in 1697*, Beirut: Kyats, 1963.

Mclaurin, R. D. (ed.) *The Political Role of Minority Groups in The Middle East*, New York: Praeger, 1979.

Melander, Erik, 'The Geography of Fear: Regional Ethnic Diversity, the Security Dilemma and Ethnic War,' *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 15, No. 95 (2009).

Melki, James, A. 'Syria and State Department 1937-47,'*Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Jan., 1997), pp. 92-106.

Messier, Ronald A., 'The worlds of Ibn Khaldun: introduction,' *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 2009).

Michaud, G & Paul, J. 'The Importance of Bodyguards,' *MERIP Reports*, No. 110, Syria's Troubles (Nov. - Dec., 1982), pp. 29-3.

Migdal, Joel, S. (ed.) *Boundaries and Belonging: States and Societies in the Struggle to Shape Identities and Local Practices*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Moosa, Matti, *Extremist Shiites, The Ghulat Sects*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

Murphy, Rhoads, *Studies on Ottoman Society and Culture, 16th-18th Centuries*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

Nordbruch, Götz, *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009.

Olsson Tord, 'The Gnosis of Mountaineers and Townspeople. The Religion of the Syrian Alawites, or the Nusairis.' In Olsson, T., Ozdalga E. & Raudvere, C. (eds.) *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, Papers read at a conference Held at the Swedish Institute in Istanbul, November, 1996, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul Transactions, Vol. 8, 1998.

Pain, R. & Smith, S.J. (eds.) *Fear: Geopolitics and Everyday Life*, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008.

Perlmutter, Amos, 'From Obscurity to Rule: The Syrian Army and the Ba'th Party,' *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol.22, No.4, (Dec, 1969) pp.827-845.

Perthes, Volker, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, London: I.B. Taurus, 1995.

——— *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*,' Adelphi Papers, Vol. 44, No. 366 (2004).

——— (ed.) *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change*, Boulder: Lynne Riener, 2004.

Philip, T. & Schumann, C. (eds.) *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, Beirut: Orient –Institute, 2004.

Pipes, Daniel, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), pp. 429-450.

——— *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Porat, Liad, 'The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Asad Regime,' *Middle East Brief*, No.47 (December 2010).

Posen, Barry, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,' in Brown, M. ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Prochazka-Eisl, G. and Prozchazka, S. *The Plain of Saints and Prophets, The Nusayri-Alawi Community of Cilicia (Southern Turkey) and its Sacred Places*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010.

Quinlivan, James T. 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,' *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 131-165.

R. D. 'Une fatwa du Grand Mufti de Jérusalem sur les Alawîtes,' *Syria*, T. 22, Fasc. 3/4 (1941), p. 299.

Rabinovich, Itamar, *Syria Under the Ba'th, 1963-66: The Army-Party Symbiosis,* Israel Universities Press, 1972.

——— *The View from Damascus*, Edgware & Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2008.

Rain, David, 'Damascus: A Geographical Field Note,' *Geographical Review;* January, Vol. 99, No.1 (2009).

Reed, Stanley F. III, 'Syria: Fin de Régime?' *Foreign Policy*, No. 39 (Summer, 1980), pp. 176-190.

Reeva, Simon, et.al. *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Rivlin, Paul, *Arab Economies in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Rubin, Barry, (ed.) *Conflict and Insurgency in the Contemporary Middle East*, New York: Routledge, 2009.

Russell, B. *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Unwin University Books, 1946.

Russell, J.C., 'Late Medieval Balkan and Asia Minor Population,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient,* Vol. 3, No. 3 (1960).

Salisbury, Edward E., 'First Ripe Fruit, Disclosing the Mysteries of the Nusairian Religion,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 8 (1866), pp. 227-308.

Salamandra, Christa, 'Consuming Damascus: Public Culture and the Construction of Social Identity,' in Armbrust, W. (ed.) *Mass Mediations, New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, pp. 182-202.

Salame, Ghassan, 'Strong' and 'Weak' States, a Qualified Return to the Muqaddimah,' in Ghassan Salame (ed.)*The Foundations of the Arab State*, Vol. 1, New York; Croom Helm, 1987.

Salih, Shakeeb, 'The British-Druze Connection and the Druze Rising of 1896 in the Hawran,' *Middle East Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May 1977), pp. 251-257.

Salzman, Philip, C. *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East*, New York: Humanity Books, 2008.

Satloff, Robert, *'U.S.-Syria Relations and the Peace Process*,' Prepared remarks for delivery at debate with Syrian ambassador Imad Mustapha, American University, November 11, 2009, Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Seale, Patrick, *Asad of Syria*: *The Struggle for the Middle East*, London: IB Taurus, 1988.

Selvik, Kjetil, 'It's the Mentality Stupid: Syria's Turn to the Private Sector,' in Hinnebusch, R. (ed.) *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria*, University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

Seymour, Martin, 'The Dynamics of Power in Syria since the Break with Egypt,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan., 1970), pp. 35-47.

Shambrook, Peter, *French Imperialism in Syria, 1927-1936*, Reading: Ithaca, 1998.

Sharp, Jeremy, M. '*Syria: Background and U.S. Relations*,' Congressional Research Service, March 11, 2009.

Shaw, S. & Shaw E. *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Vol. II, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Sheehan, Edward R.F. 'How Kissinger Did It: Step by Step in the Middle East,' *Foreign Policy*, No. 22 (Spring, 1976), pp. 3-70.

Simpfendorfer, Ben, *The New Silk Road*, 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Sindawi, Khalid, 'The Shiite Turn in Syria,' *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol.8 (June 23, 2009).

Slater, David, 'Editorial,' *Political Geography*, Vol. 23 (2004), pp. 645–646.

Schmidt, Søren, 'The Developmental Role of the State in the Middle East: Lessons from Syria,' in Hinnebusch, R. (ed.),*The State and the Political Economy of Reform in Syria*, University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

——— 'The Politics of Economic Liberalization in Syria,' *International Development Studies*, Occasional paper, No. 25 (2006).

Shaw, S. J. & Shaw, E.K., *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Smith-Williams, H. (ed.) *Historians History of the World*, 25 vols. London: The Times, 1909.

Smith, L.V. "Wilsonian Sovereignty in the Middle East: The King-Crane Commission Report of 1919," in Howland, D. & White, L. *The State of Sovereignty*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.

Sottimano, Aurora, 'Ideology and Discourse in the Era of Ba'thist Reforms: Towards an Analysis of Authoritarian Governmentality,' in Hinnebusch, R. (ed.) *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria*, University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.

Staniland, Paul, 'Explaining Civil-Military Relations in Complex Political Environments: India and Pakistan in Comparative Perspective,' *Security Studies*, Vol. 17 (2008), pp. 322–362.

Stewart, Devin, J. 'The *Maqāmāt* of Ahmad b. Abī Bakr b. Ahmad al-Rāzī al-Hanafī and the Ideology of the Counter-Crusade in Twelfth-century Syria,' *Middle Eastern Literatures*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (August 2008).

Talhamy, Yvette, 'The Nusayri Leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854-58),' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (November 2008), pp. 895-908.

———'The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Autumn 2009).

——— 'American Protestant Missionary Activity among the Nusayris (Alawis) in Syria in the Nineteenth Century,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2011), pp. 215-236.

Tang, Shiping, 'The security dilemma and ethnic conflict: toward a dynamic and integrative theory of ethnic conflict,' *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37 (2011).

Tejel, Jordi, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009.

Telhami, S. and Barnett, M. (eds.) *Identity and Foreign Policy in The Middle East*, London: Cornell University Press, 2002.

Thomas, David R., 'A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data,' *American Journal of Evaluation*, Vol. 27, No.1 (March 2006).

Thomas, Martin 'Crisis management in colonial states: Intelligence and counter-insurgency in Morocco and Syria after the First World War,' *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (2006), pp. 697-716.

——— *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Torrey, Gordon, H. 'The Ba'th: Ideology and Practice,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 445-470.

Trentin, Massimiliano, 'Modernization as State Building: The Two Germanies in Syria, 1963–1972,' *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (June 2009).

Tsugitaka, Sato, *State & Rural Society in Medieval Islam*, Leiden: Brill, 1997.

U.S. State Department - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009* (October 26, 2009).

Van Dam, Nikolaos, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1979.

——— *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 4th ed., New York: I.B. Taurus, 2011.

——— *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 2nd ed. London: I.B Taurus, 1996.

Van Dusen, Michael, H., 'Political Integration and Regionalism in Syria,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (Spring 1972), pp.123-136.

Waines, David, 'The Third Century Internal Crisis of the Abbasids, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (October 1977), pp. 282-306.

Walpole, Lieutenant F. *The Ansayrii (or Assassins) with Travels in the Further East in 1850-51*, London: Richard Bentley, 1851.

Watenpaugh, Keith, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006.

——— 'Creating Phantoms:' Zaki al-Arzuzi, the Alexandretta Crisis, and the Formation of Modern Arab Nationalism in Syria,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 28 (1996).

Weulersse, Jacque, *Le pays des Alaouites*, (Tours: Arrault & Cie, Maitres imprimeurs, 1940), Thesis, University of Paris.

Wiederhold, Lutz, 'Blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad and His Companions (Sabb al-Rasūl, Sabb al-Sahābah): The Introduction of the topic into Shāfi 'ī Legal Literature and its Relevance for Legal Practice under Mamluk Rule*,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* XLII/1 (spring 1997).

Wieland, C. *Syria at Bay, Secularism, Islamism, and Pax Americana,* London: C. Hurst & Co., 2006.

Winter, Stefan, *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule*, 1516-1788, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

——— 'The Nusayris before the Tanzimat in the eyes of Ottoman Provincial Administrators 1804 – 1834,' in T. Philip, & C. Schumann (eds.) *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, Beirut: Orient -Institute, 2004.

Wedeen, Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago University Press, 1999.

Weinberger, Naomi, *Syrian Intervention in Lebanon*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Weismann, Itzchak, 'Sa'id Hawwa: The Making of a Radical Muslim Thinker in Modern Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), pp. 601-623.

Wimmer, A; Cederman, L.E; Min, B, 'Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict: A Configurational Analysis of a New Global Data Set,' *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 74 (April 2009), pp. 316–337.

Winckler, Onn, *Demographic Developments and Population Policies in Ba'thist Syria*, Brighton & Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1999.

——— *Arab Political Demography: Population Growth, Labor Migration and Natalist Policies*, 2nd ed., Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009.

Worren, Torstein Schiøtz, 'Fear and Resistance: The Construction of Alawi Identity in Syria,' Master Thesis, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, February 2007.

Yaffe-Schatzmann, Gitta, 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 28-38.

Yaffe, Gitta & Dann, Uriel, 'Suleiman al-Murshid: Beginnings of an Alawi Leader,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), pp. 624-640.

Ziadeh, Radwan, *Power and Policy in Syria*: *The Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*, London: I.B. Taurus, 2011.

Zisser, Eyal, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2001.

——— 'The Syrian Army: Between the Domestic and the External Fronts,' *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2001).

———'Who's afraid of Syrian nationalism? : National and state identity in Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (March 2006), pp. 179-198.

Zorob, Anja, 'Trade Liberalization and Adjustment via Regional Integration: The Syrian-European Association Agreement,' in Hinnebusch, R. (ed.) *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Relationship*, University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009.